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ENTERED AT THE POST OFFICE AT NEW YORK, N. Y., AT SECOND CLASS MAIL RATES.

Vol. XV.

Published Every
Week.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, N. Y., June 7, 1882.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

No. 189

WILD BILL'S GOLD TRAIL; or, THE DESPERADO DOZEN.

(A Sequel to Major Dangerfield Burr's "Wild Bill's Trump Card," Dime Library No. 175.)

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"THE CRETAN ROVER," "THE PIRATE PRINCE," ETC., ETC.



THEN WITH HIS WAR-CRY RINGING ON HIS LIPS, A REVOLVER IN EACH HAND, WILD BILL RUSHED TO THE CHARGE.

Wild Bill's Gold Trail ;

OR,

THE DESPERADO DOZEN.

[A Sequel to Major Dangerfield Burr's
"Wild Bill's Trump Card,"
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CHAPTER I.

THE THREAT.

"THEY does say as ther Desperado Dozen were a-workin' this lead pretty strong, whip pard."

"Waal, they tells gospil truth, an' I will shout that we is in luck if we gits inter Poker City without hearin' ther Dozen sing out ter 'Halt an' han's up!'"

The first speaker was a rough-looking, hairy-faced man in miners' garb, and wearing a belt with a pair of serviceable revolvers and a bowie stuck in it.

His soft hat was well worn and shaded the upper part of his face, and a scarf, tied beneath his large woolen shirt-collar, raised it up to the ears, giving him the appearance of suffering with a sore throat.

His hair and beard were long and unkempt, and he certainly was not a man one would pick out of a crowd as the most honest-looking one in it, no matter of whom it might be composed.

He was seated on the box of a stage-coach, running on the line to Poker City, a representative border town of the far frontier, and the one he addressed was Andy Rush, the crack driver of that part of the Overland, and who held the ribbons over the backs of his six spirited horses with the air of a man who knew his work well, and did it.

The stage was rolling along the mountain road, some ten miles from Poker City, and Andy Rush was keeping his reins well in hand for he was in a very dangerous neighborhood, as the Overland robbers known as the Desperado Dozen, had stopped the coaches quite frequently of late, and the driver knew that he carried a precious load.

And precious in more than one meaning, for, besides a box of gold, concealed in a false bottom to the coach, to avoid the keen scent of the road-agent, there was in the vehicle a lovely young girl traveling in company with a tall, gray-haired man, evidently her father.

A Jew peddler, a young and timid-looking parson, evidently fresh from a theological seminary, and a lady closely veiled, so that no one had seen her face, and with a slender, graceful form, were the other occupants of the coach, and the two ladies Andy Rush always looked upon as more precious than the boxes of gold he frequently carried.

That the gray-haired gentleman felt anxiety at the dangers of the road, was evident by his face, which wore a troubled look, and he often glanced nervously toward his daughter, and kept his hand in his pocket, as though upon a weapon.

The parson was naturally timid-looking, and had an expression of nervous dread upon his face, for he would fairly start whenever he caught the beautiful eyes of the maiden fixed upon him.

As for the Jew, he sat as though the seat of the stage was a reversed pin-cushion, and every time the horses went at a slower pace, he started and glanced out of the window, as though fearing to behold the dreaded robbers of the mountains.

If the lady so closely veiled felt fear, none of her fellow-passengers knew it, for she had not spoken, and had hardly moved during the day's journey.

"Ther Dozen hes tackled your hearse several times, I hes heard," said the miner on the box, addressing the driver.

"They has."

"And is likely ter do so ag'in?"

"Yes, only I does hope they won't this time, fer I hes two leddies, as yer seen, inside, an' one of 'em I w'u'd sorrow ter see skeert by them devils."

"Ef I gits by yonder ledge o' rock, which are ther entrance ter a canyon running back inter ther mountains, I'll be safe, fer thar are ther spot they gen'rally shouts."

"Waal, I don't see none now," and the miner peered intently ahead.

"Nary, an' yer won't until they sings out."

The miner kept his eyes fixed on the ledge

ahead, and seemed trying to read the secret which it did or did not conceal.

Nearer the coach approached, and although the road was comparatively good, Andy Rush brought his horses down to a walk, to the better halt, should the warning cry ring out, for to think of disobeying the dread command—"Halt! up with your hands"—never for a moment entered his mind, against such odds as he knew the road-agents would confront him with.

As he slackened his pace, out of the window popped the head of the Jew.

"Fader Isaacs! ish de robbers here right away?"

"No, Dutchy; but I advise you to keep that head of yours inside, or you might get a bullet in it," answered Andy.

In went the head with a sudden jerk that caused the back of it to come in collision with the upper part of the coach window, and which knocked the hat off into the road.

"Mine hat! mine hat! stop for mine hat!"

"It cost me five tollars," shrieked the Jew.

"Durn your hat! I wouldn't stop in this place for that hump-backed nose of yours," answered Andy Rush, and he added, in a tone which only the miner on the box heard:

"I never stop here, even for a broken trace, unless I gits ther word."

"Yer means from ther agents, pard?"

"I does."

Just then the elderly passenger looked out, and said anxiously:

"Driver, won't you quicken your pace, for my daughter is very nervous in this part of the mountain?"

"I'll do it, sir, an' fer her sweet sake, I'll try and go through if they does shout, fer jist now I recognizes who she are—"

He started his horses forward, while the maiden's lovely face glanced out of the other window, and she said, in the softest, sweetest tones:

"Thank you, sir."

"You is welcome every time, miss, an' it will be a surprise ter them Dozen ter see Andy Rush take ther chances and go by, if they goes ter halt ther hearse ter-day; but I believes it kin be did, and I'll try it this onst."

"Thank you again, sir, for both my father and myself would rather risk their shots than meet them."

"And, if our fellow-passengers knew these outlaws as we have had cause to know them, they would gladly risk their lives to escape them."

"But we don't want to be shot mit te pullets," cried the Jew, for the maiden's remark had been addressed to those in the stage, rather than to the driver, as she had resumed her seat.

Her father then said something to her in a whisper, and instantly she drew a thick veil from her pocket and wrapped it closely around her head and face, which rendered her as unrecognizable as was the lady on the front seat.

In the mean time the stage had gone on at a brisk pace, and was almost upon the ledge.

Andy Rush held his reins well in hand, had taken his foot off of the brake, and had his whip ready for use, showing that it was his intention, if called upon to halt, to attempt to run the gantlet of the outlaws' fire.

"Holy Rockies! there they be. Fly, you four-footed terrors!" suddenly shouted Andy Rush, and he cracked his whip viciously, and shouted to his leaders, for suddenly he had caught sight of two forms half hidden by the rocks.

In response to his urging, the willing team sprung forward, and the large coach was jerked along at a slapping pace for a few rods.

But then there came, in stern, suppressed tones, the command:

"Put your foot on that brake and halt, or you are a dead man."

It was the miner who spoke, and he held a revolver-muzzle against the ear of the driver.

CHAPTER II.

THE PARSON'S PLUCK.

THE threat of the miner, uttered in tones there was no mistaking as being otherwise than in deadly earnest, caused Andy Rush to be taken aback, for, where he had looked for aid in running the gantlet of the Desperado Dozen, he now found unexpected resistance.

"Say, pard, ef yer is skeert, git inside, fer I intends ter go by," said Andy Rush, with firm determination.

The miner laughed lightly, and suddenly dragged from his face and head the bushy hair and unkempt beard.

The act revealed a very handsome, reckless and evil face, with eyes that were piercing and almost savage.

One glance was enough for Andy Rush, and instantly he put his foot on the heavy California brakes, and reined in his team, while he said, in suppressed tones:

"Jehu! you is ther devil hisself."

"Yes; I am Captain Tiger, the leader of the Desperado Dozen. Do you surrender?"

The reply was as cool as though the speaker uttered an ordinary remark, and not the assertion that he was a man noted as a fiend in human form.

"I does. You takes the chips," sullenly replied Andy Rush, as he brought his team to a halt, just as half a dozen villainous men, wearing black masks, stepped out from behind the ledge, with their rifles at a level.

The moment the stage came to a halt, the pretended miner removed his disguise and shouted:

"Keep your eyes on this man, boys, for he's slippery."

Seemingly recognizing their chief, the men answered in chorus:

"Ay, ay, cap'n, we has him covered."

Then the chief sprung to the ground and approached the door of the stage-coach.

The stern voices, the starting forward of the stage, its sudden halt, had told those within that the evil was upon them, and their worst fears were realized.

As soon as this was known, the young parson suddenly lost his timidity, and said firmly, addressing the elderly gentleman:

"Your daughter, sir, spoke as though she had cause to dread some great evil, were she taken by these outlaws, and I will aid you to defend her and this lady here from their ruthless power."

"Nobly said, sir," answered the elderly gentleman, at the same time drawing a weapon from beneath his coat.

"Defend me, too," yelled the frightened Jew.

"As a man, sir, you should defend yourself," replied the parson, sternly.

"Are you armed, sir?" asked the elderly gentleman.

"I am not, sir, as one of my cloth should not bear arms. But I know their use, and as this gentleman seems incapable of using his weapons, I will borrow his." And the young preacher took one of the revolvers from the hand of the Jew, for he had two, and was flourishing them about with more danger to those inside than those outside of the coach.

"Dat ish cost me twenty tollar, unt you must give me him back," said the Jew.

The parson coolly examined the revolver, found it loaded, and confronted the window on which side the voices sounded, just as he saw the young girl draw a weapon from her dress and hold it with the air of one who knew well its deadly nature, and just how to use it.

Just at that moment the Desperado Captain appeared at the door and threw it open.

They had seen him before as a passenger, and not knowing what had occurred on the box, the Jew cried anxiously:

"Well, mine friend, we has scared dem off?"

"No, sir; but on the contrary the Desperado Dozen demand toll of you all."

"Come, sir, out with your gold, and then I will take my prize in this fair maiden," said the outlaw leader sternly.

The words fell like a thunderbolt upon those who heard them, coming as they did from the lips of a supposed friend; but hardly had they been uttered, when there came a flash and singing report, and the miner staggered back, shouting:

"Ho, men! seize the girl and then get your gold."

It was the parson who had fired the shot, and he sprung toward the open door just as the Desperados appeared upon either side of the coach.

Then followed savage voices in command, shots, shouts, groans, a shriek, and a stern command:

"Drive on for the love of Heaven!"

"I'll do it, parson, or die."

"You is a howlin' brick turned loose, or I are a liar," shouted Andy Rush, and the whip fell upon the horses and the stage surged ahead, crushing the body of a fallen outlaw

beneath its heavy wheels, and wringing from him a shriek that those who heard never forgot.

A few bounds of the frightened horses, and the vehicle was clear of the outlaws, but dashing along at terrific speed, for Andy Rush well knew that pursuit would follow.

"Hold! Driver, one of the ladies has been captured, and the old gentleman," and the parson bent out of the window.

"Which one, parson?"

"The veiled lady."

"She'll hev ter go this time; but ef it were other, I'd go back and fight it out fer her."

"Whar is she?"

"Fortunately she fainted when she saw her father dragged out of the coach."

"Ther old man gone?"

"Yes, he was seized and pulled out of one door, just as the outlaws dragged the lady out at the other."

"And the Jew?"

"Oh, he is safe," and the young preacher smiled.

"Ther young leddy hain't kilt you think?"

"No, only swooned away."

"Then on we humps ourselves," and once more the vehicle rolled on at a breakneck pace, and, though several of the Desperado Dozen ran for their horses and went in pursuit, Andy Rush sent his team along too rapidly for them to overtake him, and they soon gave up the chase.

CHAPTER III.

WILD BILL.

AMONG the loungers on the piazza of the Hikok Hotel, as the principal house in Poker City was called, was a man whose appearance would attract the attention in any assemblage.

He was a man over six feet, straight as a Mexican lancero, had broad shoulders, small hands and feet, and dressed with an extravagance that was especially marked in that frontier town, where a blue woolen, or red woolen shirt and coarse pants, stuck in stout boots, was the make-up of the average citizen.

The person in question however wore black broadcloth pants, stuck in cavalry boots, the heels of which were adorned with massive gold spurs.

His shirt was of soft white silk, the collar being turned down over his velvet sack coat, which was open, displaying an embroidered belt with a large silver buckle.

That the belt contained a pair of revolvers and knife, none who knew the man doubted, though they were not visible.

A wide-brimmed slouch hat, encircled by a gold cord, and fastened up, on one side, with a gold pin, a miniature revolver, sat jauntily upon his head, and shaded his darkly-bronzed, stern face.

Though his face was stern, and a trifle sad, it was yet very handsome, and there was that in it to interest the most indifferent reader of the human countenance.

Half a hundred other men were on the piazza, in the bar-room, or grouped on the steps, yet none were the equal of the one I have described, and who, as he sat with his feet upon the railing in front of him, puffing a cigar he seemed hugely to enjoy, appeared wholly unconscious, or if conscious, wholly indifferent to the fact that he was the object of almost general attention, and of whispered conversation.

Though he had a ranch some leagues away from Poker City, and the very hotel upon whose piazza he sat, was named in his honor, and often was he seen in the streets of Poker City, its citizens never saw him but they regarded him with interest, and their mien toward him proved that he was held in a certain awe.

"Well, Dan, the stage is a little late," said the one I have just described, as Dan Dole, politely dubbed "Governor Dan," by the "boys," and the proprietor of the Hikok House came forward to where his honored guest sat smoking.

"True, Bill, it is a half-hour late, and I am always a trifle suspicious when it happens, since the Desperado Dozen have begun collecting toll, as they have of late."

"So am I, Dan, as I am expecting some friends, as you know soon, and in a few days will begin to run in and out with Andy, to be on hand, should the Dozen attack them."

"Don't do it, Bill, unless you have help inside, or, you may yet turn up your toes, for

the Dozen are a fearful lot they say, and their captain, Tiger they call him, well deserves the name he goes by—Hal there's Andy's horn now."

As the words left the "Governor's" lips, the clear notes of a stage-horn came floating down from the mountain, and then followed the rapid rattle of wheels, and next the stage appeared in sight, dashing along at a slapping pace.

"Something's wrong, or Andy would not drive that hill the way he does," said Dan, and all were on their feet now, gazing anxiously toward the coming stage—all but Wild Bill, who still retained his seat, and puffed away calmly at his cigar.

A few moments of suspense, for there was evidently something wrong with the coming stage, and Andy Rush reined his team up before the Hikok Hotel, and threw his lines to the stable-boys, while he sprung to the ground.

"Well, Andy?" called out the proprietor.

"But 'tain't well, Gove'nor Dan, as thar has been trouble."

"Are Wild Bill here?" was the reply of the driver.

A dozen voices cried out:

"He are."

"Yes, I am here, Andy; how are you?" and Wild Bill approached, the crowd making way for him.

"I have one of your friends inside, Bill, and t'other got left on the road."

"Which one?" and Wild Bill sprung to the stage door.

"The old man. The gal are inside."

Instantly the door was thrown open, and into Bill's arms sprung the Jew peddler.

The manner in which he continued on his way among the crowd, and the shout of laughter that went up, proved that Wild Bill was not pleased with the person who had so affectionately sprung into his arms.

"Oh, Mr. Hikok! thank Heaven I have you left," said a low voice, and Wild Bill took the slender form from the vehicle, and led her into the hotel, while behind them came the young parson.

"Boys, this heur gent are ther new Bible-churner I guesses, jedgin' from his looks; but he are ther dog-gonedest fightin' parson I ever seen, as he jist laid two o' ther Desperado Dozen out fer cold meat, an' saved ther old hearse, or I are a liar."

"Come, parson, an' wet yer whistle, so thet ther Doxology will run smooth as fallin' off a log, when yer shouts it to ther boys on a Sunday," and slipping his arm in that of the abashed young minister, Andy Rush drew him into the bar-room, followed by the crowd, curious to know all that had happened.

But now realizing that the admiration of the driver was going to force a drink upon him, the parson drew back and said in an earnest tone:

"I thank you, my friend, for your kind invitation, but will be frank enough to tell you that liquor was at one time well-nigh my ruin, and only from the degradation to which it dragged me did I rise to become what I now am, a clergyman."

"Waal, pard, you know best; but take a cigar, fer I admires yer, I do, an' ef yer can sling Scriptur' as yer kin bullets, yer'll hit every sinner in Poker City squar', an' call in ther chips o' wickedness."

The parson accepted the treat of a cigar, and then sought to escape, but Andy called out:

"Boys, I'll not pour speerits down while ther parson are heur, or ax you ter do so; but when he are gone ter his den, then we'll take a leetle drop."

"But now, fust an' foremost, I wishes ter say, in ther presence o' ther boss Gospil-grinder I ever see, thet ther Desperado Dozen tackled us, an' they got two o' my pilgrims, draggin' 'em out o' ther hearse, an' they would hev got more, ef it hadn't been fer ther parson, who showed fight, when I didn't believe it were in him, an' tharby saved ther gold dust an' t'other pilgrims."

"Now, boys, yer knows him by my interdoce, an' ef any man in Poker City don't treat him white, he'll hev ter settle with Andy Rush, an' then go ter judgement."

"Yer heurs me talk."

"Three cheers fer ther fightin' parson," yelled a voice, and in the yells that followed the young minister managed to escape, and sought his room, while the crowd assembled around Andy Rush, who told over minutely the incidents of the attack by the Desperado Dozen.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MAIDEN TELLS HER STORY.

INTO the parlor of the Hikok Hotel Wild Bill escorted the maiden, whose face was white and full of anguish, as she sunk down upon a sofa.

"Oh, Mr. Hikok! my poor, poor father," she groaned.

"I received your father's letter, Miss Insley, telling me that he would return soon; but I did not expect you for some days yet, or I should have gone to Flushtown to meet you."

"Yes, we anticipated our starting time by several days; but tell me, is there no hope for my poor father?"

"He was not killed then?"

"No."

"You were attacked by the Desperado Dozen, I believe."

"Yes, some miles back on the mountains."

"But how did you manage to escape?"

"My father seemed to feel most nervous as we drew near Poker City, as though he had a presentiment of trouble, and asked the driver to go faster, and he said he would attempt to run through, if attacked, for he recognized us as your friends, it seems."

"But there was a man riding on the box with him, whom we all thought was a miner and a passenger, and when the driver attempted to run the gantlet he prevented him, I believe, and the stage came to a halt."

"Then the man whom we thought to be a miner appeared at the door, and he proved to be Captain Tiger himself, for by that name the leader of the outlaws is called, I believe."

"The young clergyman fired upon him and wounded him, for he staggered back, and I heard the cry to 'Seize the girl.'"

"There was a lady in the coach with us, and she was seized and dragged out of one door, as my father was out of the other, and we would all have been captured had not the young clergyman killed two of the outlaws who grasped me by the arms."

"Then I fainted, and when I recovered consciousness, the stage was standing still near a brook, and the clergyman was bathing my face."

"The driver said that my father and the veiled lady had been captured, and the minister's killing the two outlaws had saved us and the gold, for he had called to him to drive on."

"That was a plucky young parson," said Wild Bill, in admiration.

"He was indeed, and I owe him more than I can ever repay."

"But is there any hope for my father, and that poor lady, Mr. Hikok?"

"I hope so, and I believe so, Miss Insley."

"At any rate, I shall take the trail at once to try and rescue them."

"Please be sure and take plenty of men with you."

"No, I shall go alone."

"Alone?"

"Yes, as I can do better alone."

"But did you recognize Captain Tiger as any one you had seen before, Miss Insley?"

"No, sir."

"There was nothing about him that struck you familiarly?"

"There was not."

"Describe him, please."

"He was in rough miner's dress, slouch hat, and had bushy hair and beard."

"A small man?"

"No, rather tall and stout."

"His eyes?"

"Were very bright, but I do not know the color."

"Then he did not strike you as being your old foe, Hugh Harcourt in disguise?"

The maiden shuddered, and answered in a low tone:

"Oh Heaven forbid! As he had not been heard from for so long, so you wrote my father, I believed, and hoped, wicked as it may seem for me to say so, that he was dead."

"I will frankly tell you, Miss Insley, that it is now my belief that he is not dead, and if alive, the character of Captain Tiger just fits him."

"But do not be alarmed, for I will do all I can to save your father, and as soon as I have had a talk with that brave young preacher and Andy Rush, I will start on the trail of the Desperado Dozen."

"From my heart I thank you, Mr. Hikok; but I fear so to have you go alone."

"I can work better alone."

"Now, go to your rooms, the ones you had when you were here before, and Governor Dan will make you as comfortable as possible."

She silently pressed his hand and turned away, and then Wild Bill entered the bar-room, where his coming was greeted with a shout of welcome by his numerous admirers.

CHAPTER V.

THE COUNCIL OF THREE.

"ANDY, I wish to see you a moment," said Bill, when he had asked the party present before the bar to "take something" an invitation that was accepted with promptitude.

"Waal, Bill, I suppose yer wants ter hear me shout ther trouble up in ther hills?" said Andy, when the two were in Bill's room together.

"Yes, Andy, for I am on a scent I intend to run down."

"Tell me all you know."

"I'll do it; but let me git ther Sky Pirate too, fer he kin talk of what he seen, an' may be he can help you."

"Do so, Andy, and I will await you here."

Andy Rush disappeared, but soon returned accompanied by the young minister.

Bill saw that the clergyman had a face that was handsome, beardless, and marked with a certain sadness that was very attractive.

He was neatly dressed in a black suit which showed to advantage a fine form, and bowed with the air of one who wanted to be on friendly terms with the world in general, as he entered the room.

"This are ther pulpit-pounder, Bill, an' he are clean grit, as were Sampson as slugged ther P'illistin's with a jaw-bone."

"Pulpit pard, this heur are J. B. Hikok, not ther boss o' this heur hotel, but fer whom it are named."

"His Christian cognomen are Wild Bill, an' ef yer c'u'd jist see him sail inter a row an' send souls ter glory, it w'u'd delight your hal-lujah soul clean through."

"Gents, shake, fer I interdooses yer."

With this characteristic introduction, Wild Bill and the parson shook hands.

But suddenly starting, as though he had forgotten something of importance, Andy said:

"Pard, durn my soul ef I hain't ferget ter ax yer handle."

"You mean my name, I suppose, Mr. Rush?" said the parson, with a smile.

"Mister Rush! Waal, thet does git me."

"I hain't been calt Mister Rush sin' Adam were a baby, biblically speakin', pulpit pard, on your account."

"Yas, I do mean yer name; but ef yer hes did anything thet hes caused yer ter advertise it, an' sail out heur ter be a Bible-banger, jist shout, an' any name will do."

"I am not ashamed of my name, my friend."

"It is Harvey Haviland."

"Good name fer a pictur'-book, I declare."

"Bill, this are Parson Harvey Haviland, who are ter run ther meetin'-house o' Poker City in opposition ter Carrots's bar an' ther Palis o' Fortin, an ef he don't strike ther bed rock o' sin, then I are a liar."

The young minister laughed lightly, and wishing to check Andy's tongue, which had been set going by a few extra drinks, Wild Bill said:

"Parson, I am glad to welcome you to Poker City, and you can count on me for a friend."

"But as Miss Insley, who was your fellow-passenger to-day, and her father are old friends of mine, I wish to ask you to tell me all that you can regarding the attack on the stage by the Desperado Dozen."

"I will do so with pleasure, Mr. Hikok," said the parson, whose face had flushed at the mention of the name of Edna Insley.

"Did you notice the leader, sir?"

"I did, for I fired at him."

"And wounded him?"

"Yes, for he staggered back and fell upon one knee."

"But the shot seemed not fatal, as I saw him rally quickly and issue orders."

"How many men had he with him?"

"Nine."

"Was he the man who was on the stage in the garb of a miner?"

"He was."

"But took command as soon as he sprung from the box?"

"Yes, but he was disguised, as one-half of his beard was tucked in, as though he had hastily put on a false beard and wig."

"Thet is jist what he did do, tho' I hev not said it afore, Bill."

"What did he do, Andy?"

"Waal, when I started ter run through ther fire, thet miner youth by me jist leveled a revolver at my head, and then he jerked off his wig and beard, an' I saw I hed been sold in thinkin' him honest."

"Describe him, Andy."

"Without his toggery?"

"Yes."

"Waal, I war jist a leetle flurried; but he were a han'some cuss, as far as I see, with smooth face, yaller hair, and a eye thet hed ther glitter of a snake."

"And he resumed his disguise again?"

"He did fer sart'in."

"It was a preconcerted arrangement, sir, doubtless, between the captain and his men, and they came to his aid promptly," put in the Reverend Harvvy Haviland.

"Oh, they is well trained; but, Bill, yer sh'u'd hev seen ther parson drop two of 'em, both 'it squar' in ther forehead, as true as he c'u'd sling a hymn-book at a deacon fer raisin' ther wrong tune."

"I saw, sir," said the minister, calmly, as though wishing to excuse his having to take life, "that the desperadoes meant the worst kind of mischief, for they fired full in the face of a Jew, who was a passenger, and Mr. Insley and his daughter seemed to be their particular game, for the gentleman was seized and dragged from the stage, and a veiled lady, evidently mistaken for Miss Insley, was also pulled out of the vehicle."

"Ah! you think she was taken by mistake then for Miss Insley?" asked Bill, quickly.

"I do, sir."

"You were cool to note these facts."

"I am not easily flurried in danger, Mr. Hikok, and I saw all that passed," was the quiet reply.

"I bet yer; fer he were cool as ther leadin' attraction at a funeral, an' pard, ef yer is a glory-shouter now, I'll bet my leaders ag'in' yer Old Testament thet yer hes been w'ar shootin' was did in t'other days."

Wild Bill noticed that this random shot of Andy Rush seemed to hit home, for the young clergyman turned slightly pale, and a shadow crossed his face, as though the remark had reopened an old wound, while he said in a hasty way:

"Yes, the leader was disguised, and I feel confident that Mr. and Miss Insley were his game, as much as the gold."

"And I believe you are right, sir, and your words go far to aid me in identifying the leader."

"Captain Tiger?"

"Yes, so called."

"You think you know him, then?"

"I do, as one both Mr. Insley and his daughter have cause to dread."

"The truth is, parson and I wish it to go no further, Andy."

"I'm deaf, dumb and blind on secrets, Bill."

"I know I can trust you, Andy, and will say that Mr. Insley was once a miner and struck a good lead; but he had an enemy who sought to find out where he had hidden his gold, and, getting him into his power, tried to wring the secret from him by torture."

"In this he failed, and Mr. Insley and his daughter, after an absence of some time in the East, believing their old foe dead, were coming West to get the buried treasure, when this attack was made."

"Fortunately Miss Insley escaped, but, unfortunately, Mr. Insley is in the hands of Captain Tiger, whom I believe to be none other than his old enemy."

"But how did he know, if he be the man you think, that the father and daughter were coming West?" asked Parson Haviland.

"I received a letter some time ago from Mr. Insley, telling me he would come West soon, and the letter had been opened, I am now confident."

"As it must have been opened by Captain Tiger, who again replaced it in the mail, he knew its contents, and, in disguise, went back on the Overland Mail, met Mr. Insley and his daughter, and came West again on the same stage with them."

"He joined us at Flushtown," said the parson.

"Yas, he bounced upon ther box with me at Flushtown," added Andy.

"Well, he is none other than their old foe, I

am morally certain, and I only hope, parson, that your wound did prove fatal."

"If it would save the life of Miss Insley's father, and her from harm, I sincerely hope so myself, though my cloth is not worn by those who kill generally," was the fervent reply of the young preacher.

"He shall not die by that villain's hands, and she shall not suffer, if I can prevent it."

"Now, I must start to work, and, parson, if I need your aid, I know you will give it."

"Willingly, Mr. Hikok."

"And I may call on you, Andy; but I have not decided fully upon my plans yet."

"Count on me, Bill, for I'll be thar."

"Now let's hev a leetle sunshiny smile o' Carrots's best brandy."

But both the parson and Wild Bill refused, and Andy Rush adjourned to the bar, as he expressed it:

"Ter play a lone han' ag'in' a dose o' brandy."

CHAPTER VI.

A PLOT FOR A LIFE.

In a cavernous retreat, some miles from Poker City, shortly after the attack on the stage-coach by Captain Tiger and his band, known as the Desperado Dozen, a man sat alone.

He was of large stature, broad-shouldered, and had a face thickly covered with beard, while his hair hung below his shoulders.

He was dressed in a suit of corduroys, wore his pants stuck in the tops of his boots, and was armed with revolvers and knife, that looked as though they were meant for use and not show.

The place where he was seated upon the rocks was a canyon's end, and so far over-arched by the rocky sides as to form almost a cave.

The spot was called, by the few who knew of its existence, Satan's Den, and the approach to it was so wild and forbidding that the name did not seem inappropriate.

"Well, I have kept my part of the agreement, for I am here, and have been for two days, and if they don't come, I'll go on and see who I can get in Poker City to join me in the work, for I have sworn that man shall die, and I will keep my word, or lose my life."

The man spoke aloud and with savage earnestness, and then he sprung to his feet, as though urged to motion by his thoughts, and began to pace to and fro.

Suddenly he halted, for there fell on his ear the sound of iron ringing against rock.

A moment after a voice was heard saying:

"Waal, this are well calt Satan's Den, an' I guesses we'll find ther Devil at home, pards, as I sees a horse up yander."

He pointed to where an animal was visible up the canyon, lariatied out near a spring.

It was the horse of the man in the retreat.

The speaker was one of four men, all well mounted, well armed, and roughly dressed as miners.

They were hard-looking characters, a single glance was sufficient to show, and just such a quartette as might be employed in any devilish work.

"Yes, the Devil's at home," and the man in corduroys stepped out from the shadow of the overhanging rocks and confronted the four horsemen, who instinctively drew rein and their revolvers at the same time.

"You skeert us, pard," said one, as all now seemed to recognize the man.

"If you are that easily frightened, you'll be no good for the work I want you to do," was the reply.

"Try me, thet's all, fer I are not as scary as I looks."

"But here we is, pard—what's yer-name?"

"Call me Captain Corduroy."

"It'll fit yer, an' thet's ther handle we'll hold yer by."

"But we is heur."

"So I see, but late."

"Ther Bible said when I were a Sunday school kid, 'It are better ter be late, than never to git thar,'" said the man who seemed to be the spokesman of the four men.

"True. We'll, dismount and after we have had something to eat we'll talk over the work to be done," and Captain Corduroy threw some sticks on a fire near by, and spread out some edibles from his haversack.

The quartette lariatied their horses out to feed, and soon the five were busy discussing the contents of their provision bags.

"Now, Cap'n Corduroy, shout ther music in which we is ter j'ine ther chorus," said Kit Carr, the former speaker among the four.

"Well, when I sought you in the mines I told you to engage three good men and true for some rough work that would bring good pay."

"An' heur are ther gents, tho' I doesn't sw'ar they is good or true, fer ther characters is left ahind them."

"But, cap'n, they hes ther grip o' a wild-cat, an' kin hold on like a bull-dog."

"Just the kind of men I want, for the one on whose trail I am, and have been for two years, is a man hard to get away with."

"And is we five goin' ter grip on one man?"

"Yes."

"We'll chaw him up."

"Not so easily, as I have known him to kill five men in less than two minutes."

"Durnation! who are this huntin' hyena on two legs?"

"He is called Wild Bill."

"Wild Bill?"

"Yes. Perhaps you have heard of him?"

"Heerd o' him? Pard, you is jokin', for we hasn't heerd o' nobody else in these heur parts, o' late."

"Yer see he got away with Dagger Don, the noted road-agent cap'n, and then he fanned out a gang as tackled him at his ranch, and news come floatin' up ter us how he got ther drop on ther two chaps as called 'emselves Blonde and Brunette Bill, and I tell yer he are a terror."

"Then you understand why I wanted five men to do the work of calling in his chips?"

"I does."

"He has a ranch not far from here, and on the trail to Poker City."

"If we don't find him at his ranch, he'll be in Poker City?"

"Yas."

"When we meet him, I will give the signal, and we'll open on him together."

"Yer don't like him then?"

"No, sir."

"Yer don't 'pear ter do so."

"I hate him, and I have sworn to kill him."

"But yer wants help?"

"Yes; as there must be no mistake this time."

"Yer has tried it on then before?"

"I have."

"But his toes w'u'dn't turn up?"

"Curse him, he killed my brother."

"Were your brother sich a leetle lamb as ter let him do it?"

"My brother was a wild, reckless fellow, but had a good heart."

"He was drunk one day, and in sport was going to hang up a nigger, just to scare him—"

"Likely it did scare him too?"

"He did not intend to kill him, only to have some fun with him, and Wild Bill interfered, there was a row, and he killed poor Jim."

"Waal?"

"My other brother, Sandy, and myself started on the track of Wild Bill, to avenge poor Jim."

"And where are Sandy Corduroy now?" asked Kit Carr, as the other paused from suppressed emotion.

"Dead!" was the savage reply.

"Toes turned up to the daisies?"

"Wild Bill killed him."

"Like as not; for they do say he gits away with all who is lookin' arter him."

"We met him one night, a year ago, and attacked him. He shot Sandy dead in his tracks, and the wound he gave me—"

"Then you met him there?"

"The wound he gave me kept me in bed for several months."

"Lordy! yer wasn't able then ter see yer brother planted?"

"No; but I live to avenge him, and, as I told you up in the camps, I will pay you well for your work."

"Waal, we is ther pets ter do ther biz."

"I have found out his haunts, since I saw you, and know just where to find him, if he is not at his ranch."

"We will pretend to be miners from the upper camp, traveling around for a little spree, and when we meet Wild Bill, keep your eyes on me, and at a given signal, I will draw, and you do the same, and if I don't drop him, then you do the work."

"We'll be thar; but it do look jist a leetle rough fer five of us ter jump on one man."

"If you see the man you won't think so."

"Waal, he do hev ther name o' bein' a howlin' terror, an' it are safer ter tackle him with odds."

"But thar are trees in this kentry, pard; lariats is plenty, and they do say as how thar be Vigilantes around."

"Bah! All in Poker City, if we kill him there, will be glad to get rid of him, for the whole town is afraid of him."

"Come! let us be off for his ranch."

Five minutes after the five villains were on the way to carry out their deadly work—if they could.

CHAPTER VII.

ANDY'S WARNING.

WHEN Andy Rush re-entered the bar—where the red-headed attendant, or "spiritual dispenser," Carrots, was doing a rushing business, for crowds had assembled to talk over the attack on the stage-coach—he found there a motly assemblage indeed.

There were tradesmen of the town, miners from the camps, cowboys from the surrounding ranches, sports, idlers, and a few strangers, who had just arrived in Poker City.

They were miners, they said, from up the country further, and having dug out a rich harvest of golden metal, had come to Poker City to spend a little of it in having a good time.

There were five of them present, and they were evidently having a "good time," according to their ideas, for they were drinking heavily, and one of their number, a large man clad in corduroys, was "standing treat" continually for the thirty souls in Poker City, whose thirst seemed to increase after every drink they took.

"Come, Andy, let me interdoose yer ter my perticker friend, Cap'n Corduroy, o' Calamity City up ther mountains," cried a tipsy idler, whose friendship with the "Captain" had begun but half an hour before and increased according to the treats he had received at his hands.

Then he continued:

"Cap'n Corduroy, this are Andy Rush, the boss of 'em all in handlin' ther ribbons over a team of six, and ther one who were on ther box when Cap'n Tiger an' his gang tackled ther hearse this mornin'."

Andy accepted the outstretched hand of Captain Corduroy, who then presented him to his four pards from Calamity City, and the driver having come in for a drink, was not averse to joining the strangers.

Captain Corduroy, it was evident, wanted to win the favor of the denizens of Poker City, and he sought the hearts of the masses by filling their stomachs with liquor at his own expense.

As captain, he claimed that he had the right to treat twice to one time of each of his four companions, and thus it went on until the Hikok Hotel rung with the shouts of the drunken roughs.

"This is called the Hikok Hotel in honor of that desperado Wild Bill!" said Captain Corduroy, addressing Andy Rush.

The driver turned and laid his hand upon the captain's shoulder and said with drunken solemnity, but in real earnest:

"Stranger, this house were named in honor o' Wild Bill, the J. B. Hikok Hotel of Poker City; but don't you whistle out no such word as desperado whar that clean grit white man are concerned, or thar'll be trouble."

"You don't mean that he will cause me trouble?"

"I does mean that and more."

"What more?"

"Thar be friends o' his heur as won't heur a word said ag'in' him."

"Bah! I have heard that he is hated here by all who know him."

"You hes heerd a durned lie, ef yer mother told it to yer."

"What?"

"I say it are a lie, fer Wild Bill hev done more fer this town than any other man, an' thar hain't no one in trouble as he don't help out, while he sometimes are on hand ter clean out them as come heur fer a fight."

"I wants ter be friendly with yer, stranger pard, but don't yer say nothin' ag'in' Wild Bill, fer he are my friend."

"Well, Mr. Rush, I don't wish trouble with you, or any other man in Poker City, for we came here to have a good time, and are not quarrelsome."

"We'll spend our money free, and do the

square thing all round; but I have met Wild Bill, I hate him, and I owe him a grudge I hope one day to settle."

"Pard, yer talks squar'; but unless yer keeps yer tongue atween yer teeth, ther fust thing yer know, up will go yer toes to ther moonlight, an' Wild Bill will be payin' ther expenses o' buryin' yer."

"I do not fear him," and it was evident that the potatoes he had indulged in, were making Captain Corduroy very reckless of consequences.

"I don't say yer is skeert; but unless yer wants deadly trouble, an' yer good time in Poker City spilt, don't say nothin' as will bring yer ter drawin' ag'in' Wild Bill."

It was evident that Kit Carr and his immediate friends were sorry to see Captain Corduroy "let the cat out of the bag," or divulge the secret, for they could see that Wild Bill was not the man of unpopularity there they had been led to believe, and, as they had heard he was in town, they felt that to kill him, without trouble to themselves from the citizens, there must be some good cause on their part.

Having given his advice to Captain Corduroy, Andy Rush called for drinks, and when they had been disposed of, he slipped out of the crowd.

Going to Bill's room he failed to find him, and then he strolled down to the store where Bill always traded.

There he found him, laying in a supply of provisions for a trip, and also filling his cartridge-boxes with ammunition.

"Waal, Bill, yer is fixin' fer ther trail, it seems?" he said.

"Yes, Andy, for I start soon to see what I can trace out regarding where the Dozen have taken Mr. Insley and that unfortunate lady."

"Bill, ef I wasn't tied ter ther Overland, I w'u'd go with yer; but, as yer knows, I hes ter go out in the mornin' ag'in with ther old hearse."

"I know it, Andy, and if I wanted company, you are the first man I should look for to go with me."

"But somehow, I do better alone, when I wish to ferret out any work of a mysterious kind."

"Come, go with me to the stable, for I must get my horse and be off."

"Bill, I'd oughter let yer go without tellin' yer suthin'; but somehow I cannot."

"What is it, Andy?"

"Waal, fust and foremost, there are five gerloots in ther hotel come down from Calamity City ter hev a good time."

"Well, can't they be accommodated here?"

"Yas, fer as fer thet, ther graveyard are not full, an' there are room fer more."

"Ah! they want a row?"

"Thet seems ter be thar way o' thinkin', Bill."

"Well, you keep out of it, Andy, for there are five of them you say, and you are too good a man to be killed."

"Let some of those we can spare in Poker City get into the circus."

"But, Bill, I is jist a leetle afeerd thet it are a better man than I be they is lookin' fer."

"Who?"

"You."

"No."

"I means it."

"Who are they?"

"Ther cap'n calls hisself Cap'n Corduroy, an' ther handles o' ther others I didn't fasten ter."

"I know no such man, at least by that name."

"Names is slip'ry out heur, Bill."

"Yes, but what makes you think they want a row with me?"

"I'll tell yer, Bill."

"Fust and foremost, they five comed heur tergether."

"Then they is all big fellers as looks as though they was bent on mischief, and didn't scare easy."

"Thar weepens is good, and not fancy, and they hang together like a drove of sheep, not one of 'em gittin' out o' arm's length o' t'others."

"They spends thar money free as pourin' water on a duck's back, and I was interdoosed to ther cap'n, who interducted me to his pards, and he told me he hed a grudge ag'in' you, an' callt you a desperado."

"Well, I am often called pet names, Andy."

"Yas, and thar are many who holds ill feelin' ag'in' yer too; but still I thinks these fellers mean biz."

"We can soon find out, Andy."

"I knows it, fer, arter I left 'em that Chinese man washerwoman at ther hotel asked me whar you was, an' said as how Miss Insley wanted ter see yer."

"I told Chinese I w'd look yer up, an' I were passin' ther door when I heerd ther followin' remark:

"Cap'n, ef yer gives ther thing away, Wild Bill will suspect, fer somebody will tell him, an' then up goes our toes."

"I looked in ther window, Bill, an' I see it were ther stranger pards chinning together, and I says to myself:

"I guess I'll put Bill on his guard."

"And I thank you, Andy."

"Waal, I w'dn't hev told yer, Bill, ef ther lady hadn't sent fer yer, but let yer ride out o' town, now; but she wants yer, an' yer hes ter go up to ther hotel, an' ef yer see them fellers yer knows what they is heur fer."

"I do, thanks to you, Andy."

"Now do me a favor."

"I'll do it ef it's ter git drunk, Bill."

"No, simply go back to the hotel, and sit on the piazza, and when you see me coming up the street, call out:

"There comes Wild Bill."

"But they'll get ready for you, Bill."

"No, not sooner than I will be for them."

"If they show signs to prove I am their game, you wave your hat to me, and I'll set the circus going."

"Now describe them, please."

This Andy did in his quaint way, and while Wild Bill went after his splendid black horse, Midnight, the driver returned to the hotel.

CHAPTER VIII.

WILD BILL'S CHARGE.

WHEN ANDY RUSH returned to the Hikok Hotel, he first sought the parlor, for the Chinese waiter told him he would there find Miss Insley.

"I found Bill, miss, an' he said he were coming."

"Yes, I wished to see him before he departed on his perilous expedition to make known to him a haunt where he may be able to find my poor father has been taken, if he has not been killed, and I asked the Chinese to find him for me."

"I found him at the store, miss, and he will be up heur soon, and ef yer wishes ter see a immortal row, jist you lie low in this heur parlor an' wait fer ther music ter begin."

"I must confess I do not understand you, Mr. Rush," said the mystified young girl with a slight smile.

"Waal, thar are a gang o' gerloots in ther bar, an' they hev come down from Calamity City, I'm a thinkin', ter go fer Bill, an' he knows thar biz, an' as he are comin' ter inquire inter it ther ball will soon open."

"But will you allow a number of men to attack your friend?"

"Oh! I'll be thar, miss, an' thar sha'n't be no underhan' game played ag'in' Bill."

"But I must leave yer, an' jist you wait heur a leetle."

With this remark Andy Rush left the parlor and Edna Insley, riveted by a fascination she could not resist, remained standing at the window, half hidden by the heavy coarse curtains, and waiting breathlessly for the coming off of what the driver had called a 'circus.'

In the meantime Andy reentered the bar and found the crowd still drinking heavily, and getting more intoxicated each moment.

But he saw that Captain Corduroy and his comrades, though they had seemingly drank freely, were apparently more sober than when he left them, which the further convinced him that they were playing a part, and were not allowing themselves to lose control of their faculties.

The re-entrance of the driver was greeted with a shout of welcome, and of course he had to drink, and Captain Corduroy treated; but Andy did not swallow the liquor, and watching closely he saw that the strangers also failed to drink the contents of their glasses, a circumstance none of the drunken crowd observed.

Going out upon the piazza Andy called out:

"Pard strangers, thar comes a man, ef yer wants ter see one, who hesn't got his ekal in these heur parts."

Captain Corduroy and his pards were on the alert at once, and passing out into the hallway joined Andy Rush upon the piazza, followed by a number of the crowd.

Almost involuntarily Captain Corduroy cried:

"Wild Bill!—be ready!"

Andy heard the words, and asked, quickly:

"Say, pards, does yer mean harm ter Bill?"

"He means harm to me, and I will but protect myself," cried Captain Corduroy.

"All right, thar are squar'; but as he don't see yer, I'll jist shout an' tell him."

Then he raised his voice and shouted:

"Ho, Bill! thar are danger camped on yer trail heur."

The warning caused a dead silence to follow, and Captain Corduroy and his pards dropped their hands upon revolvers, as though to first turn them on Andy Rush.

But he had his weapon out already, and the strangers seemed to realize that he was not the man to pick a quarrel with then and there, for a dozen friends were around him.

But with Wild Bill it was different, and Andy's hail had given out a declaration of war.

A man ever cool, Captain Corduroy was only an instant nonplused, but then he cried:

"Yes, pards, I have come to be on Wild Bill's trail, for he killed my two brothers, and right here I intend to avenge them."

This caused a general scattering of the crowd from the piazza, for they were not too drunk to forget that self-preservation was nature's first law, and they dashed into the bar-room with an alacrity that was amusing.

Not because he feared to remain did Andy go too, but he thought that from a window he could the better aid Bill, and he took up his stand just inside, and stood ready for what might follow.

The strangers had held their ground.

They had proven themselves generous fellows in facing the bar, and they would not flinch now when it was a case where there were five against one man, no matter what the reputation of that man might be.

"Give out ther hymn, cap'n, an' we'll shout ther doxology," cried Kit Carr.

"I will meet him first," sternly said the avenger of two brothers, and he stood his guard by the door of the hotel.

"Thet bein' ther case, we'll fall back a leetle," and Kit Carr gave a backward step or two, which was followed by his immediate comrades.

"You lose your gold if you desert me," savagely cried Captain Corduroy.

"Hain't desertin', only takin' up a more safer posish, cap'n."

In the mean time Wild Bill was coming toward the hotel, his horse in a slow walk.

He had answered the hail of Andy with a wave of the hand, and shown no other sign that he understood it.

He saw the sudden decamping of the crowd, and smiled, and then his eyes fell upon the tall form of Captain Corduroy, and all saw that he recognized him, for he gave a slight start.

He was mounted upon his matchless black, Midnight, sat easily in his saddle, and was evidently equipped for a journey.

As he drew near the steps leading to the hotel piazza, he drew rein and said:

"I thought you were in your grave, Dud Duncan."

"No, Wild Bill, I lived to avenge my brothers," was the savage reply, and the man drew his revolver.

"Then it is war?" said Bill, at the same time drawing his weapon.

"Yes, war to the death," shouted Captain Corduroy, and with the last word he threw forward his revolver to fire.

But ere it could flash the report of Wild Bill's weapon was heard, and the bullet shattered the pistol of his foe, knocking it from his hand.

"Come, boys, at him!" yelled Captain Corduroy, shaking his hand, severely stunned by the shock, yet but very slightly wounded.

Then, with his war-cry ringing on his lips, a revolver in each hand, and his spurs held to the flanks of Midnight, Wild Bill rushed to the charge.

It was a thrilling, desperate scene, and the pistol-shots rung out quickly.

Reaching the steps, up them the noble horse bounded, with his daring rider, and it was more than the human nature of the Calamity City pards could stand, and they gave back before the desperate advance of the man who rushed upon them, horse and horseman seeming to be one, and bent on one purpose, and that to kill.

CHAPTER IX.

ANOTHER CHANCE FOR REVENGE.

THERE are circumstances which cannot be accounted for by any ordinary reasoning, and the escape of Wild Bill from instant death in his desperate charge on horseback, was one that though hundreds saw it, they could not understand.

They saw shot after shot poured upon him, and then his shot struck the pistol from Captain Corduroy's hand.

They beheld one of the quintette fire from the bar-room window upon him, with a rifle, and then saw Captain Corduroy fall, then another, and another of Wild Bill's assailants, drop before the deadly aim of the assailed, and then the noble black animal, bestrode by the daring man was safely upon the piazza, and urged on by his anger-maddened rider he bounded into the hallway and then into the bar-room where he was brought to a sudden halt.

There was a wild scattering, and even Carrots, accustomed as he was to wild scenes and wilder men, dodged down behind his bar.

One of the quintette was the game that Wild Bill had followed there, and hotly pursued by his mounted foe he had turned at bay.

There were two shots, and one went into a heart, the other did no harm.

It was the Calamity City man who dropped dead.

And, as he fell, Wild Bill dismounted and coolly said:

"Carrots, set up drinks for the crowd, and don't forget Midnight for he deserves a glass of your best brandy."

There was no excitement about the man whatever now, and the mad fever that had been on him was gone.

"Come, gentlemen, let us have something," and he turned his piercing eyes over the room.

Then, from under tables, behind chairs, up from the other side of the bar, through windows and doors, where all had taken refuge who could, came hosts of thirsty men, in silent, almost appalled admiration of the man they had just seen do a deed none had believed possible.

"You hain't even nipped, is you, Bill?" asked Andy Rush coming in from the hallway.

"No, Andy."

"I was sent to see."

"Who sent you?"

"The young leddy."

"Ah!"

"Better come in soon as yer takes suthin', Bill, fer she hes a present fer yer."

"Take something, Andy."

"No thankee, Bill, not now."

"Then say I'll soon be there, please," and, as Andy Rush disappeared, a miner said:

"You kilt 'em all, Bill?"

"No, I shot at only four, and the fifth got away, for there were five of them."

The drinks had by this time been "set up," Carrots seeming to know just what each man wanted, and as Bill threw some pieces of gold upon the bar to pay the score, Andy Rush entered quickly:

"Bill, he hev lit out."

"Who?"

"Ther boss of 'em all."

"The leader?"

"Yes, Captain Corduroy."

"I shot to kill him."

"Waal, you missed him."

"I did not, for I saw the cut on his forehead as he fell."

"Then the bullet glanced on his hard skull, and he played 'possum to get away."

"That may be; but let him go."

"Here, Andy, look after Midnight, while I go and see Miss Insley," and Wild Bill left the bar-room, and at once there arose an excited hum of conversation regarding his wonderful achievement.

Going out upon the piazza, Wild Bill saw that Captain Corduroy was indeed gone, though two of his allies lay dead where they had fallen, and a third he had just left lifeless, lying on the floor of the bar-room.

CHAPTER X.

A VILLAIN SURPRISED.

WHEN Wild Bill made his desperate charge for the piazza, there was one of the strangers from Calamity City who felt that he had made a mistake in volunteering upon a service so dangerous as the killing of the noted ranchero seemed to be.

He was a good shot, and yet both the shots he had fired at long range were fruitless, and he noticed that those of Captain Corduroy and his comrades also failed to bring down the human game they had flushed.

At once, when the eye of Captain Corduroy was not upon him, he turned and darted into the hall.

An open door attracted his attention, and he glided into a large room, rudely furnished yet comfortable.

It was what was called the parlor of the Hikok Hotel, and was devoted wholly to distinguished guests and ladies.

It was no place for the deserting stranger from Calamity City, but it was, he observed, apparently unoccupied, and it afforded a delightful haven of refuge for him just then.

He halted in an uncertain manner for an instant, while the rattle of revolvers without proved to him that he had been wise in decamping when he did.

The tremendous racket of Midnight's iron hoofs upon the piazza coming to his ears, a sudden thought seemed to seize him, and he darted to the window, which was open, and looked out upon the piazza.

There was his game, mounted still, and boldly forcing his matchless horse upon the piazza, while Captain Corduroy, lying on his back, apparently dead, also caught the eye of the desperado.

"Ha! now is my chance, Wild Bill, and I never miss at close quarters!" hoarsely hissed the villain; and, with the side of the window for a rest, he ran his eye along the barrel of his revolver.

Wild Bill was not six feet from him, and the curtain concealing his foe, he did not see him, and it looked as though death must certainly follow the shot.

But ere the finger drew on the trigger a form glided from the shelter of the curtain at the other window, and a revolver muzzle was pressed hard against the head of the desperado, whose startled ears were greeted with the words:

"Drop that weapon, sir, or die!"

The alacrity with which the villain chose the former alternative proved his appreciation of life.

The weapon fell upon the piazza, and then came the words:

"Drop down on your face, sir, and lie there."

Never in his life before had the villain laid down in such haste.

"Put your hands behind you, sir."

The order was obeyed.

"Who in thunder are yer?" he growled.

"A girl."

"Blarst yer petticoats, what in thunder is yer playin' this on me fer?"

"Mr. Hikok is my friend, and you sought to kill him."

"Waal, this do beat all."

"Hold your hands closer together—there, now I can tie your wrists firmly together," and with her silk scarf, taken from around her waist, Edna Insley securely bound the desperado's hands behind his back.

"Now you are safe."

"I doesn't think so, gal, for I'll be chewed up as soon as that wild man comes in here."

"Yes, he may kill you," was the unconsoling response.

"Lordy!"

"It is what you would have done, had I not prevented you."

"You is mistook, gal, fer I were jest lookin' out at ther circus."

Edna laughed lightly, but it was a laugh the villain did not like.

As the firing had now ceased, the maiden went to the door, and her eyes fell upon Andy Rush.

Andy Rush had boldly stood in the doorway, his revolver in his hand, ready to aid Wild Bill with a shot, should he need it; but his admiration of his friend and the great feat he was performing, caused him to keep back unless he was actually needed.

"Bill will slew 'em all, darned ef he don't," he muttered.

"Waal, miss, yer did see ther circus, an' hed a front seat."

"Wasn't it han'some?" he said, as, in obedience to the call of Edna, he entered the parlor.

"It was a most thrilling scene, sir; but is Mr. Hikok wounded?"

"Guess not, miss. Leastways he didn't

look thet way, tho' yer kin never tell, as Bill kin carry a skin full o' lead an' not show it.

"Yas, he carries lead in him same as he do liquor, miss, for neither seems ter rile him much."

"I wish you would kindly go and see if Mr. Hikok is wounded, and—"

"Lordy! what hev yer thar?" and Andy's eyes fell upon the prostrate and bound prisoner.

"A present for Mr. Hikok."

"Waal, he are a healthy one, and one o' ther Calamity gang too—yas, he are ther one thet never treated, but allus dranked when t'others treated."

"I guess he are a sneakin' cuss, miss."

"Yes, for I captured him in some deadly work."

"I'll fetch Bill, miss, an' he will be more than pleased."

"Ef he don't kill ther varmint, guess he'll mark him," and Andy Rush went in search of Wild Bill, while Edna and her prisoner breathlessly waited, the former fearing that he might have been killed or fatally wounded, the latter fearing that he was not.

CHAPTER XI.

MERCY TO A WOLF.

It was certainly a surprise to Wild Bill, upon entering the parlor of the hotel, to find Edna Insley standing guard over a man lying prostrate upon his face, and bound securely with the maiden's scarf.

"Mr. Hikok, I am so glad to see that you have not been wounded," and she stretched forth her hand, which Wild Bill pressed gently, while he answered:

"No, strange to say, I escaped unhurt, and I am surprised at their wretched firing; but who have you there, Miss Insley?"

"One of your foes, who, fearing to face you, ran in here, and would have shot you from the window, had I not prevented him."

"Pard, pretty as her mouth are, it's a dodgin' truth now," put in the prisoner.

"Silence, sir! are you one of the gang of Captain Corduroy?"

"Who are he, pard?"

"Are you from Calamity City?"

"Never were thar."

Wild Bill stepped out of the parlor and soon returned with Andy Rush.

"Is that one of them, Andy?"

"He are."

"That settles it, and I have to thank you, Miss Insley, for saving my life."

"Now, what shall I do with your prisoner?"

"I hope you won't kill him," said Edna.

"No, I never hit a man when he's down."

"Better mark him, Bill," suggested Andy.

"No, as he has done me no harm I'll let him go, and I will send a message to Captain Corduroy, or Dud Duncan, by him."

"I'll carry it, pard Bill, an' I'll rastle in prayer for yer," cried the villain.

"Prayer from such as you is a mockery," said Edna, with a look of contempt.

"I suppose you know, sir, that Captain Corduroy, as you call him, escaped?"

"No, pard, fer I came in heur, not wishing to shoot yer, or git hurted myself."

"I have no doubt that you wished to escape injury yourself, sir, and it is well for you that you came in here, for three of your comrades lie dead out there; but it would have been the end of me, your coming in here, had not this lady been here to thwart your little game."

"An' she are a screamer, pards, fer she jist took me in out o' mischief, an' yer see she hev got me fixed."

"Yes, and you are fortunate to escape death at my hands, for I was sorely tempted to shoot you," said Edna, indignantly.

"Lordy! I'd a sot heavy on your conscience, miss; but yer do look as though yer'd hev clipped my spurs fer me, ef yer didn't let daylight inter my head."

"Now, sir," said Wild Bill, "I suppose you know where to find Captain Corduroy?"

"I might be able to strike his trail."

"Well, see that you do, and also see that the sunset finds you out of Poker City."

"It will, fer a fact."

"Tell Captain Corduroy that circumstances caused me to kill his brothers; and that now that I know him to be on the path of revenge against me, that I too will strike the same trail against him, and kill him when and wherever I find him. Go!"

He unfastened the scarf as he spoke, and

glad to escape, the villain darted out of the door, his haste causing Andy Rush to laugh heartily.

"Mr. Hikok," said Edna, "I remembered, after your leaving, that my father's foe and mine had a secret haunt in the Dead Man's Canyon, as it was called, that he believed the most secluded of all, and there, if he has not killed my father, he will doubtless take him, aware as he is that you are acquainted with his other retreats."

"That is if, as you believe, Captain Tiger is Hugh Harcourt."

"I do believe it, Miss Insley, and I thank you for your information, for there will seek your father, who, rest assured, is not dead."

"Oh, that I could think so."

"You are aware that by killing your father he could not gain the information he seeks; but he will doubtless try to force from him the secret."

"What will he not suffer? And how deeply do I feel for that poor lady, whoever she may be, that is in the power of those vile wretches."

"I leave at once, Miss Insley, and Mr. Dale, the proprietor, and the young clergyman, Mr. Haviland, who is a splendid fellow, you can call on, should you need aid or advice."

"Good-by," and ten minutes after, Wild Bill was mounted upon Midnight, and riding quickly out of Poker City, which was still in a state of intense excitement over the late thrilling scenes enacted there.

Watching his departure from a window of a cabin up the valley, was the villain whom Edna Insley had captured.

"Go on, Wild Bill; but our trails will meet ag'in, an' in settin' me free yer hes shown mercy to a wolf," he muttered savagely.

CHAPTER XII.

RED RUTH.

As I have said before, Captain Corduroy was a man of nerve, and he thought quickly in danger.

Although he had hoped to surprise Wild Bill and kill him unawares, he yet, to make certain of him, had gotten four allies to aid him in the work.

Having been thwarted by Andy Rush, in getting in a first shot, he had called to his comrades, and determined to have it out then and there.

But the desperate rush of his foe, the reckless urging his horse up the steps of the piazza, took Captain Corduroy aback, which was added to by the desertion of some of his followers, to escape the danger, and the killing of two of them.

Seeing that the tide was setting strongly against him, Captain Corduroy, as he felt a stinging sensation on the forehead, where a bullet from Wild Bill's pistol grazed him, fell quickly to the floor.

He was not stunned, but feigned death to escape the reality, while Wild Bill rode on into the bar in pursuit of one of his foes.

The crowd naturally followed, as soon as the firing within ceased, and then Captain Corduroy was on his feet in an instant and dashing down the street.

He sought the stable where he had put up his horse, threw the saddle upon him, and was hastening out of town, when he suddenly drew rein.

"Dudley Duncan!"

It was his own name he heard called, and from a woman's lips.

He looked in the direction from whence came the voice, and saw a small cabin of three rooms, situated back under the hillside, and in a clump of pines.

In the door stood a woman, and she it was that had called to him.

The cabin was isolated, and glancing back, Captain Corduroy saw no one watching him, and he quickly rode up to the cabin.

"Well, Dud Duncan, what brings you to these parts?"

"Red Ruth, you here?"

The woman was standing in the door, and her fierce black eyes were fixed upon him with a looked that seemed to read his thoughts.

Her face was handsome, in spite of its stern and cruel look, and her hair and eyes were as black as night.

She was dressed in a red velvet suit, fitting her form, which was slender and graceful, as though made for her by a city modiste.

The skirt was short, displaying small feet in

handsome boots, and upon her head was a jaunty hat with a crimson feather.

Perhaps she was thirty, and yet she looked younger, and might be older.

She wore around her slender waist an embroidered belt, and in it was a knife and pair of revolvers, all silver-mounted.

Certainly she was a strange character, and she was feared in Poker City as a madwoman, or at least as one allied to Satan.

Red Ruth she was called, and she was known in all the mines, for she had drifted through the mountains from camp to camp, and her purpose was well known.

Some years before her home had been burned, her husband, mother and two children had been killed, and she had been left for dead.

But, as she lay wounded upon the ground, she had seen who they were who had dealt her this cruel blow.

They were white men, and their leader was an old discarded lover.

Each face she had engraven on her heart, as she lay there in anguish of mind, body and soul, and when, long months after, she arose from her bed of suffering, she had become a fiend almost.

The pretty ranchero's wife, happy in her home and those who had loved her, became a cruel Nemesis, and at once set forth upon the path of revenge.

She had gone to a mining-camp, and soon after a man had died suddenly, shot down by the revengeful woman, and she had given her first stroke of vengeance.

But there were many more living, and thus it was that she had gone from camp to camp, looking for those against whom she had sworn revenge.

Soon she became known, and her purpose too, and men shrunk from her in fear, dreading she might make some mistake.

But she was as true to her memory of the faces she had seen do the red work as the bloodhound to its scent, and in the seven men she had slain, not once had she made a mistake.

Her purpose and her attire combined gained for her the name of Red Ruth, and thus was she known in Poker City, where she had dwelt for a year, living alone in her cabin, and living for the one aim of her life.

Such was the woman that had startled Captain Corduroy in his flight, by calling him by his real name.

CHAPTER XIII.

A FAVOR RECIPROCATED.

"WELL, Dudley Duncan, what brings you here?" asked Red Ruth in a terse, almost imperious manner.

"Revenge!"

The word was fairly hissed out from between the man's lips.

"Then I can appreciate fully your coming; but you belie your looks if you have gratified your revenge."

"No, I now fly from the man I came to kill, and four allies who were with me are dead."

And so did Captain Corduroy believe.

"Ah! your plot and plan went awry then?"

"Yes, but while I stand here palavering with you I am losing precious time, woman."

"You speak as though you were in danger."

"I am."

"You are pursued?"

"I will be."

"By whom?"

"The incarnate devil."

"Indeed! I hope he will come while I am here, for I have a desire to see his Satanic majesty."

"Then go and see my foe."

"What is his earthly appellation?"

"Men call him Wild Bill."

"Ha! you have crossed his path have you?"

"Yes."

"Then your days are numbered."

"How mean you, woman?"

"If Wild Bill is on your trail he will kill you."

"So I know, and fool that I am, I stand here losing time with you."

"Good-by, and some day we may meet again, Ruth."

"Hold on, Dud Duncan."

The man drew rein.

"Well?"

"You say your life is in danger?"

"Yes."

"Whither do you go now?"

"I know not."

"You go to your death, if Wild Bill is to follow you."

"In heaven's name what am I to do?"

She gazed into the face of the man and saw there a hunted look which seemed to excite her pity.

"What have you done to Wild Bill?"

"He killed my two brothers, Ruth, and I sought to avenge them."

"Had he cause?"

"That matters not."

"It does, for I have come to seek my revenge, for my loved ones were slain for no reason in God's world."

"But, Dud Duncan, once, when a man would have killed me, you saved my life."

"Do you remember the time in Rip Roaring Camp?"

"I do."

"You had just killed one of your foes, and his pard drew on you, and I shot him."

"Yes, and I have not forgotten the favor and will prove it."

"Do you see yonder cabin back under the hillside?"

"Yes."

"Take your horse there, and then come here to my cabin."

"But they will catch me here like a wolf in a den."

"No, for I will destroy your trail, where you turn off from the path and none will seek you here."

The man shook his head as though in doubt.

"You doubt me?"

"Yes."

"Well, I have lived in Poker City more than a year, and no one has yet dared cross the threshold of my door."

"Do as I tell you, and you are safe."

"Gladly will I do so, and I thank you, Ruth."

"You need not thank me, Dudley Duncan, for I do but return a favor."

"I do not like you, and I know you to be a bad man, and yet I will prove that I have not forgotten the past."

"But quick, go to yonder cabin and leave your horse, and then return here, for there comes a horseman."

The man glanced quickly behind him, and cried:

"It is Kit Carr, one of my men."

"Then I will give him shelter too."

A few moments after the two men, the sole survivors of the quintette who had gone to Poker City to kill Wild Bill, were seated in the cabin of Red Ruth, talking over the scenes through which they had passed.

CHAPTER XIV.

RED RUTH'S DEMAND.

THE reader will remember that Kit Carr, after his release by Wild Bill at the hotel, was exceedingly glad to make his way out of Poker City, and was *en route* from the town when he was signaled from a cabin under the mountain side.

That cabin was where dwelt Red Ruth, and to his delight, Kit Carr found there his former leader, for misery loves company and he was very miserable, as his comrades were dead, Wild Bill had not been killed, and he had failed to earn the blood-money which he had engaged for.

"Waal, cap'n, things look dismal, an' ther moon hev got a red face as tho' things were goin' ter grow dimaler," he said, when he was seated in the cabin, Red Ruth having taken his horse to the shanty that was intended for a stable, and which was situated in the rear of the cabin where dwelt the strange woman.

"Yes, we failed in our work, and that devil escaped us," said Captain Corduroy savagely.

"I supposes, as ther t'others has turned thar toes up I gits thar pay?"

"Yes, when that man is dead."

"He are hard to kill."

"True, but he must die."

"I gusses he is huntin' us now: leastways he gi'n me ter understan' that he'd be on my trail ef we meeted ag'in, an' I gusses he are truthful."

"Oh, he'll kill us if he gets the chance, and there is that much more reason why we should first kill him."

"But how?"

"How did you escape him?"

Kit Carr told of his capture by Edna Insley, and then of Wild Bill's talk with him, and

the warning sent by him to Captain Corduroy, who listened with marked attention, and was silent for some moments.

Then he said slowly:

"Well, Kit, our first duty is to seek safety, and then we'll plot to end his days, for he shall die."

"And so shall we, cap'n."

"But not by his hand."

"T'others did."

"But we will not."

"Yer brothers did."

"We will escape death at his hands, I tell you, and either you or I shall kill him."

"Wish I felt as sartin of it as you does."

"Wild Bill is game hard to insnare, Dud Duncan."

Both men started, as Red Ruth suddenly entered the room, for they had not heard the approach of her footsteps.

"True, Ruth, but ther grizzly even meets his slayer now and then."

"He is more dangerous than a grizzly."

"Fact! first what I were a sayin', fer he are a terror with gilt edge, m'am," broke in Kit.

"But, brave as he is, and dangerous and deadly as all his foes have found him, he can be killed if you go the right way about it."

"And what is the right way, Red Ruth?"

"I'll tell you, Dud Duncan, but upon conditions."

"Conditions?"

"Yes."

"Gold?"

"I seek gold from no man, sir."

"Then name your conditions."

"You agree?"

"Name them."

"You and your hireling there must first swear to do as I tell you."

"We will have to swear with our eyes blindfolded as it were."

"What matters that to you, who have committed all manner of crimes?" said the woman with a sneer.

"Go slow, Red Ruth," and the eyes of Captain Corduroy flashed.

"Bah! don't claim virtues, for you have them not, Dud Duncan."

"You are a villain and you know it as I know it."

"But you did me a service once, and I am willing to repay it."

"Do so then."

"I like Wild Bill, and he had always a ready hand to aid those in distress; but I will save you from him, and give you a chance to kill him upon conditions."

"And I say name them."

"You swear to do as I demand?"

"Yes, woman!" savagely answered Captain Corduroy.

"And do you also swear to do as I demand of you?"

"I does."

"If you break your oaths you'll find one upon your trail more dangerous than Wild Bill."

"And who is that?"

"Yas, who are he?"

"Red Ruth!"

There was that in the look and manner of the woman that made the two men shudder.

For a moment there was a dead silence, and then Captain Corduroy said:

"Well, what are we to do?"

"You have heard of the Desperado Dozen?"

"Yes."

"And their captain?"

"Yes; he is called Captain Tiger, I have heard."

"He deserves the name."

"Well, what of him and his red crew?"

"The Desperado Dozen need recruits."

"How mean you?"

"The twelve must be kept up."

"Well?"

"The number has been reduced of late."

"It would be well if all were slain."

"Yes, they is holy terrors, missus, an' no honest miner like me are safe crossin' ther Overland," put in Kit.

"Well, whatever they are, you two must join them."

Both men sprung to their feet and confronted the woman in dread amazement.

But she smiled blandly, and repeated:

"Yes, I mean that you shall join them, for you have both sworn to obey my demand."

Bad at heart as both men were, this strange and startling demand from Red Ruth completely nonplused them.

CHAPTER XV

"COVERED."

"SEE there!"

The woman pointed out of her cabin window as she spoke, and both men sprung forward to see what had attracted her attention.

Instantly they shrunk back and quickly drew their arms, for a horseman was riding slowly toward the cabin, having turned off of the trail leading on into the mountains.

"It is Wild Bill, and by heaven! I have him now," and Captain Corduroy sprung to one side of the window, while Kit Carr stationed himself upon the other.

"Yas, ther game are ourn this time, an' I gits ther dust, cap'n."

It was just growing dark, for the sun had set, while a full moon had just risen, and shed a subdued light over the scene.

Yet distinctly visible was the bold horseman, riding toward the cabin, wholly unmindful of danger.

"Yas, we has him," growled Kit Carr, in glee.

"We will fire together, Kit," said Captain Corduroy.

"Better let me do ther biz, as I are paid for it."

"No; I will fire first, and if I fail, then you fire."

"Does I git ther same duckits?"

"Yes."

"Nuff said; I are ready."

Wild Bill was now within a dozen lengths of the cabin, and rode at ease, though with a caution that was habitual to him.

"When he halts I will fire," whispered Captain Corduroy; and both men in their excitement had wholly forgotten the woman until her voice broke stern and threatening upon them:

"Hold! That man comes here to visit me, not to be assassinated."

They turned, and found she held a revolver in each hand, and each man knew that he was covered.

"But, Ruth, I—"

"Silence! Dud Duncan, you and that man hide yonder, and leave me to deal with Wild Bill now."

"But, Ruth—"

"Go!"

They hesitated.

"Go, or you both die."

"Quick!"

They sprung behind the curtain hung against the wall, and which she had pointed out as a hiding-place, just as there was heard without in Wild Bill's deep tones:

"Ho, Red Ruth! are you at home?"

"I warn you," she muttered toward the curtain, and then she opened the door.

"Yes, Wild Bill, what service can I do for you?" she said quietly.

"It is said that you have hundreds of disguises?"

"Yes."

"I wish to purchase one."

"Well, what do you want, miner, old man, border sport—"

"Give me an old man's rig, Red Ruth, and name your price for it."

"Return it when you have finished with it."

"Life is too uncertain to take the chances, Red Ruth."

"Well, if you do not return it I will not care, but I ask no price."

"Yet I ask a favor."

"What is it?"

"That you keep silent about my coming here, and the disguise I receive of you?"

"My lips tell no secrets, Wild Bill."

"Wait."

She withdrew into the cabin, and after an absence of half a minute returned to the door with a bundle.

"Here is the disguise, Wild Bill, and I hope it will serve you well."

"And you will accept no pay?"

"No."

"I thank you, Red Ruth, and in some way hope to repay you one of these days."

"Good-by."

She nodded in silence, and he turned his horse and rode away.

As his horse's hoofs struck the hard ground in leaving, the curtain was cast aside, and both Captain Corduroy and Kit Carr sprung out of their place of concealment, both with arms in their hands, and evidently determined to kill Wild Bill.

But, seemingly anticipating them, Red Ruth again had them covered, while she said, sternly:

"Hold! I say that man goes free *this time*."

CHAPTER XVI

OATH-BOUND.

"RED RUTH, in Satan's name, why did you thwart me in my revenge just now?" savagely said Captain Corduroy, when Wild Bill had ridden away.

"To save your life."

"Save my life?"

"Yes."

"You mean *his* life?"

"No; for he would have killed you, even though you had mortally wounded him."

"Besides, he should never have been killed at my cabin."

"Ah! I understand."

"It would have gotten you into trouble?"

"Yes, and now, knowing as you do the disguise he has of an old man, you can easily kill him after he reaches the camp."

"What camp?"

"Your camp."

"But I have no camp, and you speak in riddles."

"You forget you are to become one of the Desperado Dozen."

"Are you really in earnest?"

"I have seen too much of the sorrows and anguish of life ever to joke, Dud Duncan, said the woman, sadly."

"Call me Corduroy, and drop my real name, please."

"I'll do so, Captain Corduroy, if you like it best."

"Now tell me, what have you to do with the Desperado Dozen?"

"Nothing."

"Then why do you demand that Kit and myself should become members of that vile band?"

"There is one in that band whom I seek."

"Ah! one of those whom you are trailing?"

"Yes, one of the doomed, who brought all my misery upon me, and made me an avenging Sataness."

There was an intensity in the tone and look of the woman as she spoke that showed Captain Corduroy how deeply she felt, and how deadly in earnest she was.

"And you wish to get that man in your power?"

"I do."

"But can we?"

"You can."

"How?"

"Go to the band and become members."

"But they will kill us."

"Not if you go right."

"And how is that?"

"As Wild Bill has gone."

"Ah! it is there he has gone, then?"

"Of course; for what else would cause him to need a disguise?"

"True; but will they admit him?"

"Yes, for he will pretend to be a fugitive seeking safety, and arriving as he does, when the dozen is not complete, he will be taken, as you will be, into the band."

"I've half a mind to try it."

"You will do as I say, you and this man."

"Oh, I'll do anything," said Kit Carr.

"Your face shows that, my man," was Red Ruth's quick reply.

"Now tell me, Ruth, who is this man you wish in your power?"

"He is known in the band as Hyena Harry."

"I have heard that there was a man whose deviltries had gained for him such a name."

"He deserves it; but how can we get him into our power?"

"Win his confidence, and some day get him away from the stronghold with you, and I will be near to join you."

"I'll do it, as I have to, and Kit will also; but how about Wild Bill?"

"If you go to the Dozen, denounce Wild Bill as a spy; you will have your revenge, for he will be tortured to death by them, and you will gain their confidence."

"By Heaven, Ruth, you are right, and I willingly undertake the work."

"And so does I," put in Kit Carr.

"You are both wise."

"Now I will fit you out with disguises, and then guide you to a spot where you can readily find the Desperado Dozen."

"Once members of their band, and I will

tell you where you can find me when my victim is in your power."

"You mean Hyena Harry?"

"Yes."

"Well, we have sworn to do as you wish, and I will keep my oath."

"And I swear that same, pard."

"Enough; now I'll disguise you so that Satan would not know his own," and with a sinister laugh the woman took down bundles of clothing from a shelf and spread them out before the two men.

An hour after, having assumed their new colors, they mounted their horses, and guided by Red Ruth, took the trail leading up into the mountains.

CHAPTER XVII.

CAPTAIN TIGER'S VICTIMS.

THE pretended miner, who had ridden on the box with Andy Rush, and so suddenly metamorphosed himself into a very different looking personage from what he assumed to be, was certainly nonplused at the sudden turn affairs took, when he believed he held the winning hand.

The young clergyman he saw was the man who fired upon him, and hit him too, though the wound was not severe, yet gave him a sudden shock, and to him too he knew that he owed the escape of the stage and its treasure.

The gold carried in the coach he had been anxious to get, especially as he had promised the greater part of it to his men, if he captured the passengers he had made up his mind to get into his power, and it was the treasure the band were most anxious to get their clutches upon.

But, in the very moment of success, one bold man, and he wearing the garb of a clergyman, had wrested from them their treasure.

"But I have you, Boyd Insley, and your fair daughter, and therein I win the game I have played for, though the gold escapes me," hissed the leader of the Desperado Dozen, as the stage rolled away.

"The ole man an' ther gal hain't gold-dust, tho', cap'n," cried one of the band.

"Then mount and give chase to the stage and take the treasure," yelled Captain Tiger, and several mounted their horses, hastily led from the canyon, and darted away in pursuit, but the result the reader already knows.

"You see Satan takes care of his own, Miss Insley, for that shot failed to kill me," sneered the leader, turning to the veiled lady, while, in obedience to his orders, two of his men were binding the elderly passenger securely.

The lady made no reply, while Mr. Insley, seeing that the chief of the outlaws had made a mistake, said with joyous tone:

"If you meant to seize my daughter, sir, then you are foiled, for that lady is not Miss Insley."

"Hal do you mean this?" and Captain Tiger turned quickly to the veiled lady.

"Ask her?" was the response.

"Are you not Edna Insley?" and he seemed to wait breathlessly the response.

"I am not," was the reply in a low, soft voice.

"I believe you are shamming, and that you are Miss Insley."

"You are wrong, sir."

"In Satan's name, how could I make such a mistake?" and Captain Tiger was evidently greatly annoyed.

"We are of a size, and both of us were veiled; but, as you evidently meant harm to Miss Insley, and have no reason to hold me in your power, I am glad that the mistake was made."

"Thank you, miss, for your kind words, and you have saved my daughter much misery, as I believe this wretch to be working in the interest of one whom I thought and hoped was dead, yet now feel assured must still be alive," said Mr. Insley.

"Who, for instance?" asked the chief.

"The name you bear, sir, would fit him well, for he had a tiger heart."

"His name?"

"Which one would you know?"

"Has he two?"

"He has a number of *aliases*."

"Ah! by which one did you know him, may I ask?"

"I will call him Hugh Harcourt."

"*Hugh Harcourt*!"

The name fairly burst from the lips of the veiled lady, and her start and words could not but attract the attention of the man, who

turned and glanced curiously upon her, while he said, addressing Mr. Insley:

"Hugh Harcourt is the name, you say?"

"Yes."

"It seems to me that I have heard it before; but give me one of them *aliases* and perhaps I can tell you if I know him."

"He is also known as Handsome Hugh, Old Buckskin, and the Indians call him Lone Pale Face, as he dares not live among his own race, but hides like a hermit in the mountains," and Mr. Insley spoke with a sneer, while he kept his eyes fixed upon the bearded face of his captor.

"I have heard of all these names too, and that the wearer of them was a dangerous man."

"But you, sir, are in my power, and I am Captain Tiger, the chief of the Desperado Dozen, and—"

"I have heard that Captain Tiger was tall, splendidly formed, with a dark face, handsome, full of fascination for those who saw not the evil beneath the surface, while you are—"

"Quite the opposite, miss, for though a large man, I am, as you see, neither gracefully formed or handsome," and Captain Tiger again turned his searching gaze upon the veiled lady, as though striving to see the face she so carefully concealed.

Just then a man approached and said something to Captain Tiger, addressing him in Sioux, which both seemed to understand perfectly, but which they believed was an unknown tongue to the prisoners.

He said:

"The stage escaped, and the boys have returned, and with them Sandy Tom, who is just from Poker City, and reports that Wild Bill is in town, and evidently plotting mischief against the Dozen."

"Yes, and my word for it that Wild Bill yet causes each one of this band to swing for this day's work," burst out Mr. Insley, unmindful of the fact that it were better, did he keep the secret of his understanding the Sioux tongue to himself.

"Hal you understand Indian, do you?"

"Well, you have befriended us all in making the fact known, and in the name of the Desperado Dozen I thank you," and Captain Tiger bowed with marked respect.

Mr. Insley bit his lips with chagrin at the mistake he had made, and remained silent while Captain Tiger again spoke to the man who had just brought him news of Wild Bill being in Poker City, and who was none other than Hyena Harry, the second in command of the Desperado Dozen.

"Hyena Harry, bring horses for these prisoners, and then we will go to our stronghold, for I expect the Vigilantes will take our trail after to day's work," said the leader.

"There is no doubt of it, and for the risk we run this lady and gentleman should be made to pay a royal ransom to us," answered Hyena Harry, who was a man evidently in former life accustomed to the best society, and, though fallen and crime-stained, yet had a polish of manner that was marked, even in perpetrating his most devilish acts of cruelty.

That he was disguised was evident, and even Captain Tiger, it was said, had never seen his face free of the false beard he wore.

In obedience to the order of his superior, he led horses from the canyon, and placed the veiled lady in a side-saddle, evidently bought for the use of Edna Insley, as easily as though she had been a child, for she offered no resistance.

Mr. Insley was then aided to mount, and the party rode away further into the mountain recesses, the men very gloomy over having had their Dozen reduced to seven of late, and losing the treasure they had hoped for.

CHAPTER XVIII. THE OUTLAWS' EDEN.

I WILL follow the Desperado Dozen into their mountain fastnesses, which Nature had done so much to make a safe retreat, that it was no wonder that a band of half a hundred Vigilantes had not dared pursue them there.

A narrow trail, which forced them to ride in Indian file, led for several miles around the abrupt sides of mountains, through canyons which were mere splits in the hills, across foaming torrents at fords known only to the Desperado Dozen, and where the misstep of a horse would hurl him and his rider on with the current and dash them to atoms on the cataclysms below.

For months, it was said, the outlaw captain

had lived alone in those hills, canyons and mountains, and all that time his daily work was to find a safe retreat from foes.

That safe retreat he most certainly did find, for, like wheels within wheels, no one unacquainted with the secluded spot could follow the trail leading to it, and even those who knew it well, in broad daylight, needed all their nerve and skill to keep to it.

By night, the captain alone, it was said, had had the hardihood to follow it, and Hyena Harry, making the attempt by moonlight, had lost his horse, and barely escaped with his own life.

It was no wonder, then, that when pursued by the Vigilantes or soldiers, the pursuers halted at the dangers they were forced to confront, especially when there were passes to go through, which one man, with a pair of revolvers, could defend against half a hundred.

Taking the lead, and with Mr. Insley's horse next his own, then the one ridden by the veiled lady, and behind the band, Captain Tiger went on the way to the secret retreat.

Several times Mr. Insley paled at the dangers that were before them; but the veiled lady, silent and her face unseen, showed no emotion, sat upright, following the leader, her reins held well in hand.

At last, after passing through a tunnel, formed by earth, rocks and trees, choking up the narrow top of a deep canyon, the party came out in an opening, the beauty of which caused an exclamation of surprised pleasure to burst from the lips of the veiled horsewoman, and Mr. Insley to say:

"Well, this is certainly a lovely scene, an Eden in which dwell devils in human form."

"Yes, I love nature, and this is my paradise, as it will prove your purgatory, Boyd Insley."

"You are welcome, sir, and you, lady, are also welcome in the haunt of the Desperado Dozen."

The spot was indeed lovely, seemingly a garden of wild flowers in the wild mountains. Cliffs covered with wild ivy mantles were to the north and east, and sloping hills to the south and west.

Purest streams of water flowed through the basin, and beneath a clump of majestic trees were half a dozen white tents, the mark of U. S. upon them showing that they had been captured from the army.

A marquee, evidently intended for some general, was the abode of the outlaw chief, and soft bear, buffalo and panther-skins served as a carpet, a Mexican hammock for a bed, and with a table covered with books, several easy carpet camp-chairs, and other articles of comfort, it was by no means a disagreeable abiding place.

"Here, my fair veiled nun, will be your home until we can arrange upon terms which will give you your freedom," and the chief turned to aid the veiled lady to dismount.

But discarding his offered hand, she sprang lightly to the ground and entered the marquee.

"There, Mr. Insley, are your quarters for the present, and it will depend upon you what they will be in the future," and Captain Tiger led the way to a tent near by.

Upon raising the fly Mr. Insley started, for he saw that within a cage of iron rods had been ingeniously made.

It was about seven feet square, had a canvas hammock and camp-stool within as furniture, and that was all.

A door just large enough to admit a man was in the front, and two padlocks held it secure.

"That, sir, was made of iron rods captured in one of Uncle Sam's quartermaster wagons, and one of my men has manufactured a safe cage for you to dwell in, as you see, Mr. Insley," said Captain Tiger.

"Great God! will you confine me in there like a wild beast?" and the poor man shrunk back.

"For the present, yes, and after that you are to determine what is to be your fate."

"Unbind him, Harry, and put him in his cage, for he is a rare bird I wish not to escape," and Captain Tiger turned away with a rude laugh, while the poor captive was thrust into the iron-barred prison.

CHAPTER XIX.

UNVEILED AND UNMASKED.

THE following morning Captain Tiger wended his way to the marquee, or large canvas, where was the veiled lady.

"May I see you?"

He stood outside and politely asked the question.

"Come in," was the quiet answer.

He found her seated in one of the easy camp-chairs, her arm resting upon the table.

She had thrown aside her wraps, yet her veil still concealed her face, and observing it, he looked disappointed.

But he sat down and asked:

"Do you still assert that you are not Edna Insley?"

"I do."

"Your voice is strangely like hers?"

"Voices are often alike," was the calm reply.

"Your form and general appearance also resemble her."

"Yet I am not the lady you deem me."

"How could I be so mistaken, for I saw her face distinctly, recognized her, and she, too, was dressed in dark clothing, and when wounded, I bade Hyena Harry to seize her, and you I find instead of Miss Insley—that is, if you are truthful in your denial."

"I am truthful, for I am not Miss Insley."

"Will you permit me to see your face?"

"When I have heard from you what your intention regarding me is."

"To obtain ransom."

"You have a different motive regarding Miss Insley?"

"Yes."

"And her unfortunate father?"

"Yes."

"But you will release me for ransom?"

"I will."

"Name your price."

"Are you rich?"

"I am able to pay a fair sum."

"Such as a couple of thousand, for instance?"

"Yes."

"Suppose I say five thousand?"

"You are exorbitant."

"You will not pay that sum, then?"

"Yes, but upon conditions."

"Then I must make the amount larger to meet the conditions."

"I will not pay one dollar more."

"Then five thousand it must be."

"Upon conditions."

"Name them."

"You said you knew of one called Hugh Harcourt?"

The man started, and it did not escape the quick eye of the woman.

"I have heard of such a man," was the evasive reply.

"Do you know where he is now?"

"No."

"Could you help me to find him?"

"I could not; but why do you ask?"

"That, I will not disclose."

"There is a secret in it then?"

"Yes."

"If I knew," said Captain Tiger slowly, after a moment of hesitation, "the whereabouts of one person, I might find Harcourt for you, that is if I was certain you meant him no harm."

"Why should you care what befell one such as he is?"

"Simply, I care for him upon the principle of fraternity, for, as a villain myself, it is my duty to protect a fellow villain."

The words were uttered in a tone that riveted the attention of the woman, who said in measured tones:

"I am so anxious to find him, that I must confess to you that he is connected to me by ties of the strongest kind."

Again the man started; but with assumed indifference he asked:

"A brother, perhaps?"

"No."

"Not a husband surely?"

"Yes."

"By Heaven! you are Gertrude."

The words broke from the man's lips, full of frenzied passion, and he turned livid.

It seemed evident that he had betrayed himself, for a curse was crushed back between his lips, as the woman cried:

"Yes, I am Gertrude, his deserted wife, whom he so cruelly wronged."

"But who are you that calls me by name?"

"I—I—have to confess that I know Harcourt well, and he has often spoken to me of his wife, Gertrude, whom he loved so dearly, and whom a cruel fate caused him to be separated from."

"Man, you dare not bring me face to face!"

with Hugh Harcourt, and let him tell me that he loves me, and a cruel fate divided us," she said with suppressed emotion.

"I will do all I can to restore you to him, and— Ha!"

The cry was wrung from him, as the woman suddenly bounded forward with the spring of a panther, and, ere he could resist, had torn from his face and head the false wig and beard he wore.

"At last your voice betrayed you," Hugh Harcourt, we are again face to face."

The words rung like a trumpet from the lips of the woman, and at the same time she drew off her veil with one hand, and with the other leveled a revolver at his heart.

CHAPTER XX.

THE FAIR NEMESIS.

"WOMAN, you have sealed your fate," and Hugh Harcourt, as the woman covered him with her revolver, spoke in suppressed tones.

"You are in no condition to make terms, Hugh Harcourt," was the prompt reply.

"What mean you?"

"Just what I say."

"You are my prisoner."

"And, your life is in my hands."

"Bah! a call to my men would soon end your little game."

"They would find you a corpse," was the determined response.

In spite of his natural courage and reserve, he turned a shade paler.

But he answered in an indifferent way:

"You may level your weapon, but you are a woman and your aim would fail."

"Hugh Harcourt, don't hug that idea to your heart, for it is not true."

"Since last we met, day after day have I practiced with revolver and rifle, until I can drop a small bird on the wing every shot."

"You knew me, years ago, as a piece of clay in your hands, to be molded as you wished."

"Look at me now, and you find me changed from that foolish girl to a woman bent on revenge, and I have come here only to seek you."

"Look upon me, Hugh Harcourt how hard and stern you have made the lips you once called twin rosebuds, and see that the eagle's look has driven the dove-glance of yore from my eyes."

He gazed silently upon her, and saw a face still very beautiful, though it had passed its thirtieth year.

He beheld a form of rare grace and beauty, and eyes and mouth to do and dare whatever the brain might prompt.

She still covered him with a weapon, and he knew that the dove had become the serpent, and dared not move, for well he read determination to kill in her face.

To extricate himself from his danger he knew he must devise some plan, and that plan must be to deceive.

With his honeyed way, which he knew well how to assume, he said:

"Gertrude, I am a very wicked man, I admit; yet why you seek me to take my life, I surely cannot understand."

"In your false throat you lie, Hugh Harcourt," was the savage retort.

"No man could tell me that and live; but, as you seem to feel that I have wronged you, when I have all along regarded myself as the wronged one, I will not resent aught that you may say."

"Hugh Harcourt, believing in your honor, and loving you, I became your wife."

"I expected to bring to you a fortune, but, alas! after one year of wedded life, my father died bankrupt, and I, the supposed heiress, was left penniless."

"It was my money, not my love that you wanted, and I saw at once a marked change in you from the day of my father's death."

"One night, oh! how well I remember it, I was taken ill, and for a long time lay near death's door; but I recovered, to find that you had left me, when I was supposed to be dying, called away upon business of importance, you said."

"I did not know then, Hugh Harcourt, that you had given me poison to get rid of me—"

"It is false, I—"

"It is true, as you know, for she told me all."

"She? Who do you mean?"

"Your wife."

"Bah! that woman you saw there?" he said, with a sneer.

"Yes, and you knew that I saw her, for her intention to tell me all caused you to fly like the guilty wretch you are."

"Gertrude, she poisoned you, not I."

"It is false, for she was a poor, wronged thing, and you had deserted her."

"She tracked you, swore to make known all, and then you told her that you would send me off and return to her."

"You tried to send me off forever, but I did not die, and that woman nursed me back to life, for she came to me when she found I was ill, and her swearing to have you hanged if I died made you fly."

"Ah! Hugh Harcourt, I was a dove then, but I am cruel as a vulture now, and I have come to seek you to kill you."

"You will not do it," he said.

Yet his words and manner gave his bold assertion the lie.

"Oh yes I will, for that has been the one aim of my life."

"I have tracked you through all your villainy, and forced you to hide yourself here, where you have openly become what at heart you always were, a robber, a murderer."

"I have recovered from my father's estate a fair fortune, and it has enabled me to find you, and I consider it well spent, for it has gained for me revenge."

"Now, Hugh Harcourt, if you have not forgotten to pray, put in a prayer, for you have just one moment to live."

CHAPTER XXI.

SATAN'S HAND.

THAT he was in the direst danger, Captain Corduroy well knew, for he saw before him a woman whose dove-like nature, changed by his wrongs to her, had become merciless and revengeful.

The steadiness of her hand that held the revolver, told him her aim would be sure, and he almost gave himself up for lost.

In his peril, and with the seconds flying quickly, he thought with the rapidity of lightning, and it seemed a score of plans to escape flashed through his mind, and were given up as fruitless.

The time was passing, and the slender finger was upon the trigger, and in sheer despair he blurted out:

"Oh, Gertrude! be merciful to me a sinner."

"No."

"You will not spare me?"

"I will not."

"Do you think your conscience will not haunt you with my life until you die?"

"I have weighed all I am to suffer, Hugh Harcourt, and when you have died by my hand, peace and consolation, if not happiness, will come to me."

"Then give me time to pray."

"You shall have just one more minute, for the time I gave you is up."

"Now, Hugh Harcourt, if you dare appeal to God, do so quickly, for so help me Heaven, I fire at the end of that time."

He bowed his head, yet not in prayer, but in a plot to escape her.

Did he spring upon her it would be certain death, he felt. Did he call out, her slender finger would at once draw upon the trigger.

Under excitement, and the prosecution of his guilty ends, Hugh Harcourt would face any danger, and take tremendous chances against death.

Yet with this woman, whom he had so wronged, to threaten him with death, and thereby gain her revenge, he became a coward and quivered visibly with terror.

In mortal agony he raised his head, and as he did so, he saw a dark form glide into the tent with the step of a panther, so noiseless was it, and the weapon of the woman was struck from her hand, just as her lips were about to part with the fatal words that the minute was up, and she nerved herself for the shot.

"Ha!"

The exclamation burst in a frenzy from the woman, and white with passion she turned upon the one who had disarmed her, and thus cheated her of her revenge.

"Foiled! How dare you save the life of that wretch?" she hissed, and her right hand fell upon the hilt of a knife, half concealed in the folds of her dress.

"Saw the captain in danger, miss, for you looked as though you meant deadly work, so chipped in to save him," was the indifferent reply.

Seeing that he was safe, at once restored Captain Corduroy's natural nerve and affrontery, and in the coolest manner possible, he said:

"And I thank you, Hyena Harry, and am yours to command. Your coming was most providential."

"Dare not blaspheme, sir, by saying Providence would aid such as you."

"No, no, it was not the act of Providence, but the hand of Satan that protected his own," hissed the woman.

"Call it what you may, sweet Gertrude, I am safe and you are doomed," said Captain Corduroy, in hoarse tones.

"Doomed?"

"Yes; for I will see that my life is no longer in danger of being cut short by your roaming at large."

"Hyena Harry, put her in the cage where Mr. Insley now is, and send him to the den," was the cool order.

"I will see to it, while you go out and meet two men who have been brought in by the sentinel."

"Prisoners?"

"No, they say they wish to join the band."

"Good! for our number has been diminished of late."

"I will see them," and Captain Corduroy was left alone in the tent, while the poor woman was given over to the tender mercies of Hyena Harry.

CHAPTER XXII.

NEW ARRIVALS.

I MUST now return to Edna Insley after the departure of Wild Bill from Poker City, when she was left comparatively alone in the Hikok Hotel, for her fellow passenger, the young clergyman, she had not seen but once since her arrival.

Though she felt perfect confidence in the wonderful powers of the noted scout to aid her father if a prisoner to the Desperado Dozen, she yet was full of anxiety regarding his fate, not knowing whether he was alive or dead, and her kind heart went out in deepest sympathy also to the strange, veiled lady who had been dragged from the stage.

In her former state among the wild spirits of the border, Edna Insley had become somewhat accustomed to their ways, and felt not the dread she had at first experienced, for she knew that beneath the rough exterior of nine-tenths of the men in Poker City, was an innate love of fair play and chivalry which would not permit insult to her.

Besides Dan Dale, the "Boss of the Hikok Ranch," and "the Governor of the Hikok Layout," as he was called by the boys, Wild Bill had told her to command as she would himself, and the proprietor certainly did all in his power to make her feel at home in his hotel.

Her meals were served her in her little sitting-room, and every attention that could be shown in that wild region was extended.

The landlord, having once been a jailer, knew the rudiments of hotel-keeping, and having a talent that way, had gained popularity for his house, for the universal opinion in Poker City was:

"Governor Dan Dale knows how to run a hash house."

Two days passed away after the attack on the stage coach, and yet no news came from Wild Bill, which caused Edna to become so painfully anxious regarding the fate of her father, the veiled lady and the scout, that she did naught but pace her room.

At last, unable to remain in her rooms, so great was her excitement, she sent for Dan Dale.

That worthy was in his office when Chinese Slick Sam appeared with the request:

"Melican leddee wantee see hashee housee bossee."

"Wants to see me?"

Slick Sam nodded.

"Say I will come up at once."

"Samee telle allee lightee," and the Chinese disappeared, and was soon followed by Dan Dale.

He found, upon entering, that Edna was very pale and nervously pacing to and fro.

"How can I serve you, Miss Insley?" asked Dan, kindly.

"I there no news, sir?"

"Bill has not returned yet, miss, if that is what you mean."

"Ah! I fear all hope is lost."

"No, no, miss, for Bill is not a man to say

die, and I'd have to see him buried before I'd believe he was dead."

"But, though I have confidence in Mr. Hikok, I yet cannot but fear he may be killed."

"Not he, miss, for he is as good as a dozen men any day, and Captain Tiger's band don't number that now, from all accounts, as the Fighting Parson, as the boys call Mr. Haviland, cleaned some of 'em out, and while Wild Bill lives I have hopes."

"So don't get blue, Miss Insley."

"I try not to, yet I feel as though I would go mad here waiting— Oh! what is that?"

The clear notes of a horn were heard coming down from the mountain road, and Dan Dale said quickly.

"It is the stage coming in, and Andy may have news."

He ran down stairs, and the next instant up dashed the coach with Andy on the box.

"Well, Andy, any news?"

"No, Governor Dan, for the road is as clear of agents this trip as the prairie is of snakes in winter."

"But I has three pilgrims inside fer yer."

The "pilgrims" were two passengers who dismounted and ascended the hotel steps.

They carried shot-guns and rifles, were dressed in hunting costume, and had a couple of dogs in leash, which were under the care of one of the trio who was evidently a servant.

They appeared to be foreigners, and were evidently amateur sportsmen come to America for a hunt on the western prairies.

"Frog-eatin' Frenchmen, or I are a liar," said one of the crowd as the three passengers entered the hotel.

"Come out heur fer game, an' see ef they don't find it," said another of the lookers-on.

Dan received them politely and found that they were Frenchmen, so they said in broken English, traveling for sport, and intended to put up a few days, or weeks, in Poker City, as the case might be.

They wanted a sitting room and bedroom adjoining, good quarters for their servant and dogs, and were able and willing to pay for all they got.

They were shown to the best rooms in the house, excepting those occupied by Edna, and then Dan Dale returned to report to the maiden that Andy brought no news from Wild Bill, or of the Desperado Dozen.

"I will go wild here, Mr. Dale, with suspense, so please order a horse for me this afternoon and I'll take a rapid gallop," said Edna.

"You will not go far, miss?"

"Oh no, only ride off this feeling that oppresses me," was the answer, and a couple of hours after, attended only by Slick Sam, whom Dan Dale insisted should accompany her as an attendant, the maiden rode away from the hotel, and directed her course toward the mountain road.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A LION IN LAMB'S WOOL.

THOSE who had seen the Reverend Harvey Haviland arrive in Poker City, predicted that he would have a hard time of it.

Those of better feeling in the wild community shook their heads dubiously, and felt that Satan's gripe on the town was too strong to be shaken off.

But the advent of the young parson had by no means been a tame one, and the story of his brave defense of the stage-coach against the Desperado Dozen, went from lip to lip until he became a hero, and at once commanded the respect of the community.

Several missionaries with good intent had settled in Poker City at different times, but their stay there was of short duration, for not blessed with an eloquence to fascinate a grizzly bear, one had offended by his remarks and taken a ride out of town, mounted on the sharp corner of a rail, and another had been advised, in the language of the advisers:

"To git, an' git lively an' don't yer tarry until yer hunts other diggin's whar yer kin be more usefeller."

He "got," and it is hoped found a more appreciative community.

A third, interfering in a row had been shot, and another, a fourth, had a faint heart which caused him to tarry in Poker City just one night, and take the first stage out, leaving his slender baggage and Bible behind him, for the boys were having a "high old time," when he arrived, and he saw that it would take him a day or two to bury the dead.

The "Fighting Parson" and "Holy Terror"

as the Reverend Harvey Haviland had been christened, in the nomenclature of Poker City, had quietly ensconced himself in a pleasant, sunnyroom of the Hikok House, from the window of which he had a grand view of mountains and valley.

His trunks contained books and other things to make him comfortable, and give a cosey look to his sanctum.

Here he passed much of his time, though he had purchased a horse and spent a couple of hours daily in the saddle.

There was no church in Poker City, but he had gone to work to build one out of his own pocket, for he seemed to have money, and though the edifice would by no means be an imposing structure, it would yet be a place in which to worship.

Independent of creed he called upon the best citizens and urged them to join him in the good work he had undertaken, and received some little encouragement, though as a number lived off of the wickedness of Poker City denizens, it was not to be expected they would be willing to "take a shingle off their own roofs" by putting down vice.

And in two days and a half Parson Haviland had started his church, made himself comfortable in his room, called on half the "headlights" of Poker City, and made himself a marked man.

Just after the departure of Edna Insley for her ride, the Fighting Parson came down from his room, and was greeted with some respect by the two-score idlers who had assembled to see the stage come in, and yet tarried.

One ruffian, a burly loafer who was always ready to pick up a fight, seized him rudely by the arm as he was passing, and said insultingly: "Heur, Bible-banger, yer hain't made my acquaintance yit, an' tharfore yer is behind ther age, so I'll interdooce yer."

"What are yer appellation?"

"My name is Harvey Haviland," was the quiet rejoinder, and though the parson's face flushed there was no show of anger upon it.

"Waal, Have-a Have-a-land, come an' have-a-drink, fer I are Howlin' Tom o' Poker City, an' when I shouts ther little fellers squeal."

"Thank you, but I do not drink."

"Don't drink? Does yer mean it?"

"I never drink intoxicating liquors, my friend."

"Then yer is no friend o' mine, an' I hev half a mind ter wear yer inter ribbons ag'in' ther floor."

"I certainly should advise you not to try," was the calm rejoinder, and Parson Haviland would have passed on, when the drunken bully, infuriated at the warning, seized him by the throat.

Instantly there was heard a dull thud, and a heavy fall, and Howling Tom of Poker City fell his full length upon the floor, his face bleeding from the terrific blow he had received from the fist of Harvey Haviland.

Shouting with rage he arose to his feet, and the parson, warned by a score of voices, again turned, as the ruffian was rushing upon him.

Parrying the blow of the sledge-hammer like fist of Howling Tom, the parson dealt him a second telling stroke, straight out from the shoulder, and once more the bully went down amid a general shout of delighted applause.

"Howlin' Tom, yer is licked."

"Ther Bible Buccaneer are a Bruiser from Bruiserville."

"Ther Holy Terror are a screamer"

"Don't hit him ag'in, parson, or yer'll hev ter bury him."

"Bully fer ther Gospel Grinder."

"Hooray fer ther Doxology Screecher!"

"Look out, Holy Pard, he are goin' to use his weepins!"

The last was good advice, and caused Parson Haviland to turn again, as he was walking toward the door, and he saw his foe just rising to his feet, his hand upon his revolver.

With the bound of a tiger he was upon the bully, and with the rapidity of lightning rained half a dozen blows in the bleeding face, which sent Howling Tom a third time to earth, and this time unconscious.

Disarming him of his revolvers and bowie-knife, the young minister handed them to Dan Dale, with the quiet remark:

"When that bully regains his senses give him these weapons, please, Mr. Dale, and with them the advice that he had better shun me, if he means harm, for, though I wear a white cravat, I shall protect myself from insult."

Amid a general burst of applause the parson walked out of the hotel, while Andy Rush, who had seen the fracas, and stood ready to aid the parson, cried:

"Pards, that man are a lion in a lamb's wool, or I are a liar from infancy."

This expressed opinion of the popular stage-driver was concurred in by the entire crowd, and when Howling Tom recovered his senses, he was advised by a chorus of voices to steer clear of the Fighting Parson.

"I'll kill him fer it," he muttered savagely, as he left the hotel and went to his den to nurse his bruised and bleeding face.

CHAPTER XXIV.

EDNA'S ESCORT.

SLICK SAM, the Chinese man-of-all-work at the Hikok Hotel, was no horseman; but he was delighted to be the escort of Edna in her ride, and when placed on the top of his horse remarked with confidence:

"Me ridee horsee til tailee come offee."

"You ride the tail off o' thet animile, yer durned heathen, and Gov'ner Dan will cut yer head clean off yer shoulders," was the threat of the stableman, and it cooled Slick Sam's ardor somewhat.

But he gave one of those cunning leers, peculiar to his race, and which Mr. Bret Harte has designated "child-like and bland" and rode on after Edna, who was mounted upon Meteor, one of Wild Bill's horses, which he had left in the care of the hotel proprietor.

Slick Sam was the envy of all who saw him ride away with Edna, and remarks, not at all complimentary to the Chinese-American citizen, were passed upon him for the honor having fallen upon him.

"What are it on ther summit o' thet anni-mile?"

"Are it a monkey with a tail on ther back o' his head?"

"Did ther wind blow it down from the mountains?"

"What does it feed on?"

"It are a Injun pappoose?"

Such were the remarks that reached Edna regarding her escort, as she rode along, and, in spite of her grief and anxiety she smiled, as she glanced back at Slick Sam, who had had himself tied in the saddle, and with his legs perched up, did not look at first sight, unlike a huge yellow monkey.

The same leer was upon his face which he had started with, and as the remarks of the crowd grew more frequent, he drew from his pocket a pack of cards and held them up for view, while he shouted back in his shrill tones:

"Slickee Samee no ride horsee allee samee like Melican man, an' Melican man no play cardee allee samee likee Slickee Samee."

There were many present who realized the truth of this, as the deft fingers of the Chinese had caused them to lose many a game of cards in playing with him, and which loss also meant a diminishing of their money, for such a thing as playing except for money was not to be tolerated in Poker City, and was looked upon as a sin a man was not to be guilty of.

Leaving the village behind her, Edna held on her way along the stage road which the stage had been attacked upon, although she knew well the danger of being alone, for, as a protector she did not regard Slick Sam in a very flattering light.

She seemed to hope she might meet Wild Bill returning with glad news for her, or at least with words to relieve her painful suspense, be the fate of her father and the veiled lady what it might.

She was also compelled to confess to herself that her interest in the handsome ranchero, Wild Bill, was very deep, and her anxiety regarding him was as great, almost, as for her father.

Though reared in the far East, in society of the best kind, and having met men who were shining lights among their fellows, Edna Insley yet felt drawn to this dark-faced, long-haired borderman with feelings of the strongest kind.

In the past he had saved both her own and her father's life, and what deeds of valor she had seen him perform, and which were accredited to him, had filled her with both awe and admiration.

"What if he and my father should both be dead?" she muttered as she rode along.

Then her face flushed and her eyes flashed, as she said aloud and in a ringing tone:

"If harm has befallen them, then, as sacredly as does the nun devote her life to one pur-

pose in life, so sacredly will I give my every energy to avenging them."

"Missee callee Slickee Samee?" and the Chinese rode alongside of her, believing she was talking to him.

"No, Sam, I was talking aloud, but to myself," she answered, in an absent way.

"Allee lightee; but we get shootee if go up here," volunteered the Chinese.

"If you are afraid you can go back."

Sam looked hurt at having his courage thus impugned, and answered:

"Slickee Samee not afraid o' hellee."

This warm assertion startled Edna, and she was about to rebuke the heathen's utter disregard for the purgatory of his Christian brothers, when the clatter of hoofs was heard behind them.

Turning quickly, she saw three horsemen approaching.

Two were in advance, and one riding a few lengths behind, while all seemed well mounted, and were coming on at a slapping pace up the mountain road.

Slick Sam turned a soiled white, which gave the lie to his assertion of a few moments before, and evidently felt that the Desperado Dozen had him.

"Runnee, runnee likee debbee," he shouted, and believing that Edna was going to follow his advice, he struck his horse a severe blow, which sent him bounding up the trail at a terrific pace.

But Edna reined Meteor back, for she recognized in the coming horsemen the strangers who had arrived in the stage some hours before, and whom she had observed somewhat critically.

She called to Slick Sam, but he could no more stop his horse than he could a locomotive, and disappeared in the pine forest, just as the horsemen pulled up.

Raising their hats politely, those in advance bowed low, while one said:

"I fear we frightened off your escort, and as this, we are told, is a dangerous locality, permit us to serve you."

Edna saw two men who had the appearance of gentlemen, and she had been told that they were foreigners who had come West for sport on the plains, and feeling that she was indeed in a lonely and dangerous locality, she answered:

"I thank you, gentlemen, and will accept your kind offer, while I also beg that you will endeavor to aid me in my search for poor Slick Sam, who is tied to his horse, and I fear may be injured."

"Willingly, miss."

"Let us at once ride up on the mountain road," and Edna, with one of her escorts on either side of her, and the servant still keeping his position a few lengths in the rear, rode on in pursuit of poor Slick Sam.

CHAPTER XXV.

A DOUBLE SURPRISE.

In spite of their polite manner, and seeming kindness, Edna Insley could not bring herself to exactly like and feel full confidence in her two escorts.

They had the air of gentlemen, their arrival at the Hikok Hotel had been regular, and yet there seemed to rise in her heart a doubt of them which she could not shake off.

Anxiously she gazed ahead, in the hope of catching sight of poor Slick Sam, that she might at once turn about on her way to Poker City.

But, after a ride of a mile, not having seen him, she drew rein with the remark:

"I must give up the search for the unfortunate Chinese, and send some one out to hunt him up who knows the country well, for it is dangerous for us to penetrate these mountains any further."

"But, my dear lady, if we ride on a mile further, we may be able to find that unfortunate fellow," said one of the strangers.

"No, I shall return," said Edna, firmly.

"You certainly will not desert your escort in his trouble, even though he be a poor Chinese?" boldly said the other stranger, who was riding on her left.

"I shall do as I think best, sir, and as you gentlemen seem to desire to continue your ride, pray do not allow me to detain you," was the haughty reply of the maiden.

"But we cannot permit you to return alone and unprotected, Miss Insley, and as we do intend to go further up into the mountains, you must accompany us."

"Must?"

The eyes of Edna Insley flashed fire, and she seized her rein and whip with a firmer grasp.

"That was what I said, Miss Insley," was the cool response.

"Instead of protectors, then, I find in you men from whom I need protection, it seems, so I will bid you good afternoon."

She started to wheel her horse as she spoke, but the reins were seized upon each side by the two men, while the third spurred quickly forward, and she was hemmed in between the three.

Instantly she called to her horse, and at the same time gave him a sharp blow with her whip.

The animal reared wildly, but the men held firmly to the reins, and then, quick as a flash, she laid the lash across the face of each.

The stinging pain caused one to cry out with pain and the other to utter a savage oath, but they held firmly to the reins, and in spite of Meteor's struggles he was unable to rid himself of the gripe of the assailants.

Seeing that she failed with her whip, Edna quickly drew a small revolver from her saddle-pocket, but a severe blow upon her wrist from the handle of a whip held by one of her foes caused her to drop it upon the ground.

Then she knew she was in the power of ruffians, and in almost despair cried:

"What do you mean by this outrage upon an unprotected girl?"

"I mean, Miss Edna Insley, to carry you on into the mountains, where your presence is anxiously desired."

"And by whom?"

"Captain Tiger, the chief of the Desperado Dozen!"

"Ah, Heaven have mercy upon me!" groaned the young girl, burying her face in her hands and bending over in her saddle, while the two men still held firmly to her reins.

"Prayers are useless here, Miss Insley, for—Ha!"

There came a sudden crashing of the underbrush, a shot, and the speaker fell from his saddle, while out upon the trail bounded a horseman.

There were several rapid shots, a fall of a horse and rider, a bounding away of a steed with a man upon his back, and then the stern words:

"Quick, Miss Insley; ride back down the trail, for there may be others of the band near."

"And you, sir?" cried the maiden, thinking of her brave rescuer.

"Will follow—go!"

It was a command and she obeyed it, and away dashed Meteor, with Edna Insley upon his back, and close upon his heels came the horseman who had so opportunely come upon the scene.

That horseman was the Reverend Harvey Haviland, the Fighting Parson.

CHAPTER XXVI.

REINFORCEMENTS.

"A SECOND time, sir, I owe to you more than I can ever repay by words," said Edna, with deep feeling, as she and the Fighting Parson drew rein after a gallop of a mile or more.

She turned her eyes, brimful of tears, upon her rescuer as she spoke, and held out her hand.

He clasped it, bent in his saddle and imprinted a light kiss upon the gloved fingers, yet uttered no word in reply, while his face flushed crimson.

It was evident that though a lion in battle, the Reverend Harvey Haviland was a lamb in the presence of the beautiful girl.

Intuitively Edna saw this, and at once continued:

"In the absence of my father, I am going to ask you to be my friend and protector, for I feel that I can appeal to you without appearing unmaidenly."

"You can, indeed, Miss Insley, and believe me, I will be as a brother to you, so command me under all circumstances."

"I cannot but regret, however, that you should be in this wild region."

His embarrassment had now disappeared, and he spoke in a deep, rich voice that was very pleasant to the ear.

"Ah, sir! fate has been very cruel to me and mine, for adversity sent my father here to the mines, where, on account of his digging a fortune in gold, he was dogged by those he

believed his friends, and tortured almost beyond endurance to make him divulge the hiding-place of his treasure.

"The man who was his foe sought to make me his wife, and thus get his grip upon my father's gold, when he could not wring the secret from him, and discovering just what he was, I came West after my mother's death."

"I found my father, and rescued him, through the kindness and courage of that splendid specimen of manhood known as Wild Bill."

"Ah yes. I witnessed his feat at the hotel. He is indeed a remarkable man."

"He surely is, sir, and if you knew all he had done to aid my father and myself, you would understand well why I place my confidence in him."

"He is now away searching for your father, I believe?"

"Yes, and for the veiled lady, who, you know, was seized by the outlaws for me."

"God grant that he find them both and succor them," fervently said the parson.

"I say amen gladly to that, sir, and I believe that he will, for the man is one to carry out all he undertakes."

"Have you an idea who were your assailants, Miss Insley?" asked the parson, thoughtfully.

"They professed to be foreigners come West to hunt."

"True; but I doubt their story, for I noticed though they spoke before others with a certain foreign accent, they dropped it when they were by themselves."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, and more; I overheard one of them say distinctly:

"She has gone riding with only the Chinese as an escort, so now is our time."

"You surprise me."

"It surprised me, and for that reason I mounted my horse, armed myself, and followed you."

"You were most daring to come alone, sir."

"I felt that perhaps I could serve you without aid," he said, with a blush.

"And nobly did you do so."

"I found," continued the parson, "that the three strangers were ahead of me, so being something of a borderman myself, I struck out on a trail of my own to head you off, as I saw you far up the mountain road."

"It brought me out upon the mountain trail just as that frightened Chinese dashed by—"

"Was he hurt?" anxiously asked Edna.

"No, Miss Insley, but fearfully frightened."

"I tried to check his horse, but he shouted to me to let him go, as the 'Melican ba manees' had captured you."

"Poor fellow."

"He went on down the trail I had just come, and which will lead him back to the town, while I started forward in search of you to discover you just then coming toward me with the strange horsemen."

"I reined my horse back into the bush to allow you to pass, fearing that I had been too precipitate, and had misunderstood the intention of the men, as you certainly seemed to dread no harm; but as you drew nearer I heard and saw what had occurred, and you know the rest."

"And again I thank you, sir, and must say that you are a rival of Wild Bill in your deeds of valor; but see, there come a number of horsemen."

Just then there came around a bend in the trail two-score horsemen riding at a gallop.

At their head was Andy Rush and Dan Dale, evidently leading the party, the cause of whose coming was made evident by seeing Slick Sam, the Chinese, still mounted upon his foam-covered horse, riding in the midst of the miners.

A shout of joy went up, as they discovered Edna safe, and the parson with her, and when the maiden, in a few words, told what had happened, Andy Rush said:

"Waal, boys, we'll leave Miss Insley ter go back with Gove'nor Dan and ther Heathen Chinese, while we makes ther Holy Terror our cap'n, an' go on ter wipe out ther gang o' outlaws by stringin' 'em up."

This suggestion was greeted with a cheer, and at once acquiesced in by the Fighting Parson, not from a desire to participate in further bloodshed, but to make himself the better acquainted with the sinners he was to lead from their paths of wickedness; and because he thought he might be able to serve Edna's father and the veiled lady, should the

bandit stronghold be reached by the attacking party.

With a bow to Edna, he placed himself at the head of his wild company, and with Andy Rush by his side, continued on up into the mountains, while Edna returned to Poker City with Dan Dale as her escort, and Slick Sam following behind, and muttering Chinese oaths against "Melican men" in general, but the Desperado Dozen in particular, for the cords that held him to his horse had cut the skin, and being forced to go a second time on the trail, to point out the scene of attack upon the maiden and himself, for he had so reported it, he by no means relished.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE MINERS ON THE TRAIL.

WHEN Harvey Haviland found himself so suddenly in command of a company of miners, instead of a congregation of erring sheep, he took his honors calmly, and showed at once a resolution and knowledge of what was best, that won the respect of his hardy and reckless followers.

"We better go in lemmons an' charge ther outlaw community," said a miner.

"I shall do what I consider best, sir, and please understand, that though I will ask for the advice of those I consider competent to give it, I yet will act as I deem best."

"Lordy! ther parson hev got ther bit in his teeth, an' I'll git out o' ther way o' his heels," muttered the man who had given his advice voluntarily.

"Yas, an' ef he preaches as he fights, he'll knock Satan out o' his hearers, an' pound ther stuffin' out o' ther 'Holy Book,'" added another of the party.

After a talk with Andy Rush, the parson decided to go to the scene of attack, and see if any discovery could be made by examining the dead, for he asserted that he knew his aim had been true.

Then if possible, they were to strike the trail of the man who escaped and follow it wherever it should lead.

A ride of ten minutes brought them to the scene, and all suddenly drew rein, for a change had occurred there since the parson had left.

A steed lay wounded by the roadside, and it was the one which had been ridden by one of the two supposed foreigners.

Further on lay a dead horse, and near him the body of his rider, who was none other than the pretended servant of the two strangers, who had put up at the Hikok Hotel.

A bullet wound in his forehead showed how he had died, and the parson said:

"That man I killed, and I also killed his horse and wounded the other; but what means that?"

As he spoke, he pointed to a form hanging to a limb.

"Didn't yer hang him, Bible Pard?" asked Andy Rush.

"By no means. He is the first I fired upon, and he fell, as I believed, dead, or mortally wounded."

"Then I rode away with Miss Insley at full speed, fearing they might have accomplices near, and now, only a half-hour after, I return to find the man hanging yonder."

"Waal, it are mister'us, I sw'ar; but it do look as tho' somebody hed been heur sin' you left," said Andy Rush.

"That is evident," replied Harvey Haviland.

"Perhaps he were wounded, and know'd he c'dn't git away, an' so saved us ther trouble o' hangin' him," suggested a miner.

"No, that man did not hang himself."

"See here," and the parson pointed to the manner in which the rope was tied to the tree, and he added:

"Besides, his hands are bound behind his back."

"Yas, Pard Parson, or ruther Cap'n Parson, ther pilgrim hev been reg'lar hung an' no mistake, that are sartin as preachin'."

"An' moreover, he are one o' ther pilgrims as come over with me, an' thar are t'other: but where are number three times?" and Andy Rush looked around, as though he expected to see the body of the third stranger.

"You remember that I told you one rode off and made his escape?" said Harvey Haviland quietly.

"Thet are so."

"Waal, waal, this one hev escaped too, an' thet one also, but it are the boys heur thet they hev escaped."

"Now, cap'n, what is we to do?"

"There are good trailers here, I suppose?" and the parson looked over the crowd.

"Thar be men heur, Bible Pard, as kin trail a bird," said one.

"Then let us pursue the trail of the man who rode away and see what that will lead us to."

"That are sense from Senseville, pard," cried a voice, and it was evident that the decision of all was to follow the advice of the parson, who said:

"First we have a duty to perform."

All looked at him in silence.

"These men are human and as such deserve burial at our hands."

"Chuck 'em over ther cliff," cried a voice.

"Let's hang t'other, so they'll sarve as warnin' to ther pards."

"Better see what they hes got in ther pock-ets."

"Parson, you drag out ther mater'al they hes about ther clothes, an' then we'll perceed ter go."

Such were the remarks that went through the crowd, and Harvey Haviland said quietly:

"See what there is about them, Andy to, identify them."

The stage-driver at once obeyed, and some money was found, and in the pockets of the hanging man a bundle of letters, which were handed to the parson, who placed them in his pocket with a mere glance at them.

"Now, my friends, set to work with your knives and enlarge that hole there, and it shall be their grave."

"Leave 'em to ther crows, pard."

"No, they must be buried," was the firm reply.

"They hain't no kin o' ourn."

"It matters not, they are human beings."

"They is a hard crowd, an' it don't seem right ter put 'em under ground same as we would a pard."

"I shall repeat the service of the dead above them, be they what they may."

"Ef yer does thet yer may set 'em on ther wrong trail, an' they'll git ter Parydize, arter all they has did."

"When dead, all our animosity for them must cease."

"Durned ef I turns a knife full of earth," said one man doggedly.

"Then mount your horse, sir, and go back to Poker City for I want no man of your caliber in a company I command."

The words of the young minister were resolute and stern, and the miners saw that he was in earnest, and the offender said quickly:

"Beg pardon, Cap'n Parson, I'll dig clean through ter Purgatory ef yer say so, an' it'll make ther down trail easy for 'em, as likely they'll take thet way."

"Come, pards, ther parson says bury 'em, an' we'll do it."

This settled it, and the two men were laid side by side in the newly dug grave, and over their bodies Harvey Haviland's deep tones repeated a part of the burial service for the dead.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A VILLAIN'S CONFESSION.

HARDLY had the young parson and Edna dashed away from the scene of the attack of the outlaws upon the maiden, when one of the two, who had fallen under the aim of Harvey Haviland, arose on his elbow and glanced around him.

"Well, Satan has not forgotten me, for, though that bullet knocked the breath out of me, it glanced on my rib and the wound is not worthy of thought."

"That was that fighting parson who charged so suddenly upon us and thwarted my little game, and if he preaches as he fights, he'll convert every sinner in Poker City."

"But I must get away from here, or there'll be Vigilantes on my trail."

"Confound that Count Carlos, he decamped at the first shot."

"But I am not dead yet, and while there is life there is hope."

"There is no hope for you, Dudley Duncan."

The man fairly sprung to his feet, and his hand dropped instinctively to clutch a revolver and face the one whose deep, stern tones had so startled him.

But a form bounded before him and a weapon covered him, held in a hand that never trembled and whose aim was deadly.

"Wild Bill!"

The man fairly gasped the name.

"That is what men call me."

"And you have the drop on me?"

"And intend to keep it."

"How did you know me?"

"I knew you when I saw you in Poker City and we had our little brush, and I thought I had killed you."

"Now, though you are evidently playing another game of devilry under a false name, I know you."

"You would not kill me without giving me a chance for life?" almost whined the man.

"You know I am no murderer, and you know, too, that I take big chances with life and death, and I will take the same with you."

"Name your terms."

"First, who was the lady who rode away just now?"

The man hesitated.

"Speak, sir."

"Miss Insley."

"You and your comrades made an attack on her, as I saw from yonder cliff, though I was too far away to be of aid?"

"I will not be questioned by you, Wild Bill."

"Look here, Dud Duncan, Captain Corduroy, or whatever you choose to call yourself, you know that I killed your two brothers, who sought my life?"

"Yes, curse you, Wild Bill, and I will yet kill you and avenge them, if luck does not fail me," was the bold retort.

"I know that such is your purpose, sir; but I tell you plainly that, as surely as I killed your brothers, if you refuse to answer my questions truthfully, and I can tell when you are lying, I will kill you."

"But, if you answer, I will give you a chance for your life, though why I should not shoot you down, I cannot understand."

"You pledge your word to give me a fair chance?"

"I do."

"And will keep your pledge?"

"You know me."

"Answer yes, or no."

"Yes."

"Then proceed with your catechism," was the indifferent response.

"What know you of Miss Insley?"

"Comparatively nothing."

"What motive had you for attacking her, with the evident purpose of kidnapping her?"

"I acted for another."

"His name?"

"That I will not tell."

"Answer, or I fire."

"Well, Captain Tiger."

"The chief of the Desperado Dozen?"

"The same."

"He paid you to kidnap her?"

"I arranged to get her into his possession."

"Who were your accomplices?"

"One was an ally who aided me in my attack on you in Poker City."

"He lies there?"

"Yes."

"And the other?"

"Was one of the Dozen."

"Captain Tiger?"

"No."

"Which one?"

"His lieutenant."

"His name?"

"Hyena Harry."

"Ah! I have heard of him."

"Doubtless," and the man spoke with a sneer.

"And the one who rescued her?"

"Was a young preacher whom the Pokers call the Fighting Parson."

"He is a brave man."

"Yes, he is properly called a Holy Terror."

"Now answer me, what are you to Captain Tiger?"

"Nothing."

"You are not one of the Desperado Dozen?"

"No."

"But the ally of Captain Tiger, who, for a service you render him is to return the favor?"

"Yes."

"You were to get possession of Miss Insley for him?"

"Yes."

"He was to aid you in killing me?"

"Yes, in taking you alive that I might hang you like a dog, Wild Bill," was the honest and savage reply.

"Thank you; but do you know, I never expect to meet your fate."

"What is that?"

"Die by hanging."

In spite of his nerve the face of the avenger paled. But he said in his reckless way:

"The hemp is not grown yet, Wild Bill, to make the rope to hang me."

Wild Bill smiled, and said, abruptly changing the subject:

"You have changed your rig, since I met you in Poker City some days ago."

"Yes, and I am surprised that you recognized me."

"Oh, I would know you under an Indian's war-paint and feathers."

"Did you just come from Poker City?"

"Yes."

"And with Miss Insley?"

"No."

"She certainly did not know you in your true character, to come out here alone?"

"No, indeed, she knew me, and Kit Carr there, and Hyena Harry, who escaped, as foreigners."

"Foreigners?"

"Yes, I was Baron Bronx, Hyena Harry was Count Carlos, and Kit Carr was Pierre, our servant, and we had come West to hunt," and the evil man laughed aloud at the deception he had practiced.

But Wild Bill looked stern and said:

"And this devilish plot was made up to capture Miss Insley?"

"Yes, and for another purpose."

"What was that?"

"To kill you," was the reckless and bold reply, and at this Wild Bill laughed outright.

CHAPTER XXIX.

AN AVENGER'S FATE.

"You seem merry," sneered Dudley Duncan, alias "Captain Corduroy" and "Baron Bronx."

"I am, to think you were such a fool as to believe that I would not know you in any disguise."

"I fooled all Poker City who knew me."

"They did not know you as I have, for I have your image stamped well on my mind, and false beard, or French airs cannot efface it."

"If you have a conscience, Wild Bill, you should remember the faces of my two brothers whom you murdered."

"It was no murder for they deserved killing."

"But I do remember them, though their death at my hands does not cause me sleepless nights, any more than will your life if it rests upon me."

"I hate to take human life, but such as you I kill as I would a reptile."

"And I would rejoice to kill you, and have lost much time in trying to do so; but what more questions have you to ask, Wild Bill, for I am anxious to be on my way."

"Doubtless, as you fear the parson may set the Vigilantes upon your trail."

"Now answer me, do you wish to save your life by leading me to the stronghold of the Desperado Dozen?"

"I could not if I wished to."

"Why?"

"I do not know the trail."

"You have been over it."

"Yes."

"And do not know it?"

"I do not."

"You are a good borderman."

"True, but it would take a bloodhound to follow that trail without going over it many times."

"How often have you done so?"

"Twice only."

Wild Bill frowned, and Captain Corduroy said:

"Aha, Wild Bill, Captain Tiger thwarts even you, in hiding in the mountains."

"So far, yes, but I will yet find his trail."

"I doubt it."

"When did you leave the retreat?"

"Two days ago."

"With whom?"

"Kit Carr and Hyena Harry."

"How did you get there if you knew not the trail?"

"I was taken to the outer vedette by one who knew where he was stationed."

"Who guided you to the sentinel?"

"That I will not tell you."

"Very well, it is immaterial; but tell me, is Mr. Insley a prisoner to Captain Tiger?"

"Yes."

"And a lady captive he has also?"

"Yes."

"How are they treated?"

"I do not know."

"Well, as you have answered me better than I expected, I will now keep my word to you."

"And release me?"

"By no means, but give you a chance for your life, for that only did I promise."

"What is the chance?"

"Draw your knife and meet me."

"Wild Bill, that is no chance, and you know it, for you are well aware that I am no match for you."

"You are as large as I am, and have boasted of your skill as a shot and with the knife."

"But it would be certain death for me to meet you."

Then draw your pistol and I will step away twenty paces, and, at a given word, we will advance toward each other, firing until one falls dead."

"That is a chance, I admit, but a slight one, for you never miss."

"Oh, yes, sometimes I do."

"Here is one of my revolvers."

Wild Bill, as he spoke, handed to the villain one of his pistols.

Mechanically the man stretched forth his hand for the weapon, and, seizing it, suddenly threw it forward and drew trigger, with the muzzle full in the face of Wild Bill.

To his horror, the cap snapped and Wild Bill laughed, and, springing forward, dealt him a blow that felled him to the earth.

In an instant he had him bound, his hands behind his back, and his lariat in a noose around his neck.

"I expected treachery on your part, Dud Duncan, so gave you a weapon I knew had two barrels unloaded."

"I have kept my word and given you a chance for life and you abused it, so now I shall hang you without mercy."

"Do not kill me, Hikok," pleaded the villain.

But Wild Bill was obdurate to all prayers, and throwing the loose end of the lariat over a limb, he said:

"Dud Duncan, three years ago you were sentenced to die on the gallows for a cowardly murder, and you escaped."

"I would then, as sheriff, been your hangman, so I merely carry out now the orders I had then."

"If you dare pray do so quickly, for your life ends within a minute."

"Mercy, Wild Bill, for I am not fit to meet death."

"That is your look-out, sir. Pray if you dare to do so."

The wretch groaned in anguish, and writhed fearfully, but Wild Bill was stern and merciless, and after waiting a few moments in silence, he drew on the rope, and his great strength readily hoisted the doomed man into the air.

The cry on the lips of the struggling man was cut off by the tightening lariat, and, making his lariat fast to a tree, Wild Bill walked away, leaving the body swaying to and fro.

CHAPTER XXX.

CAPTAIN TIGER'S VISITORS.

It is time now to return to the robber stronghold, and those whom the reader remembers had not only become the prisoners, but the victims of Captain Tiger.

When saved from certain death at the hands of the woman whom he had deserted and so deeply wronged, Captain Tiger had her conveyed, it will be recalled, to the cage in the tent where Mr. Insley had been held captive, while he, poor man, was taken to a place known as "The Den."

This loathsome prison the reader will soon have a glimpse into, but now I will make known what followed, after the deserted wife of the outlaw chief had been dragged away.

Going to the guard, after seeing that the female captive was secure, Hyena Harry bade two men, whom the sentinel had in his charge, to follow him.

They were both securely blindfolded, and bound, and had an air of trepidation which showed, though they had come to volunteer as members of the outlaw band, they would be happier elsewhere just then.

"You are now before the chief of the Desperado Dozen," said Hyena Harry calmly, as he led the two men into the tent.

"Unblindfold them," said the chief, who had removed his disguise and sat at the table in a free and easy way, puffing a cigar he had just lighted.

Their eyes were at first dazzled, when they saw the light, but they soon fixed them upon the daring leader of the outlaws.

The two men were none other than Captain Corduroy and Kit Carr, for I am going back in my story, kind reader, to the better gather up the threads to weave together at the incident of the finding of the hanging body in the mountains, by the Fighting Parson and his followers.

"Are you Captain Tiger?" asked Captain Corduroy quietly, though he gazed with interest upon the bewhiskered face of the man before him.

"I am so called."

"You are the leader of the outlaw band, known as the Desperado Dozen?"

"I am."

"Then you are the one we seek, for we have come to join your band," was the bold remark of the man.

"Why should you?" coolly asked Captain Tiger.

"Doubtless from the same cause that you are here."

"And what is that cause?"

"Because your crimes have made it too hot for you to live elsewhere."

"By Heaven, but you are blunt enough."

"I but tell the truth."

"Perhaps you do; but you say you wish to join my band?"

"I do."

"And your comrade?"

"Also desires to join, but must speak for himself."

"I kin do it, for I am a out-and-outer rascal, an' what are more I knows it," said Kit Carr with both truth and honesty.

Captain Tiger laughed lightly, and said:

"Well, if you don't belie your looks I think you will make good members, and my Dozen has been cut down four or five of late."

"Then we are in time."

"Oh, yes, Satan guided you here just as you are wanted; but what is your name?"

"Captain Corduroy."

"You have been a chief villain somewhere else, it seems, from the title you give yourself; but here there can be but one captain."

"You?"

"Yes."

"I am willing, and I merely gave you the name I am dodging the law under just at this time."

"Ah! and your name, sir?" and Captain Tiger turned to Kit, who said:

"My name are Kit Carr."

"Stealing two-thirds of your name, even."

"How so, pard?"

"From Kit Carson."

"Nary. It were Kitredge Carridine, afore I changed it from necessity."

"Ah!"

"It were fer a fact; but I hev cut it down ter Kit Carr, an' yer kin shout that name at roll-call an' I'll be thar every time."

"You are a precious pair, and I guess you'll do."

"What do you say, Harry?" and Captain Tiger turned to Hyena Harry.

"If they stand the test they are all right."

"Is you Hyena Harry?" asked Kit Carr.

"Yes."

"Waal, you two is a precious pair, from all accounts, an' I thinks so, or I'd lie to a preacher."

"What is the test we will have to stand?" asked Captain Corduroy.

"Where are you from?"

"The country at large."

"Ah, yes, itinerant gentlemen; but where did you come from last?"

"Poker City."

"Indeed. What was your business there?"

"To kill Wild Bill, the scout and ranchero," was the prompt reply.

Captain Tiger started to his feet and asked eagerly:

"Did you do it?"

"Not this time."

An oath of disappointment broke from the lips of the chief of the Desperado Dozen, and he sunk back in his chair, while he said in a vicious tone:

"Nor will you the next, for that man bears a charmed life."

"You'd have thought so had you seen him get away with my little party that called for him to pass in his chips."

"You had a fight with him, then?" and it was very evident that Captain Tiger was deeply interested.

Kit Carr answered the question with:

"Did we hev a fight with him, pard?"

"Yes."

"Waal, it were a battle, an' ther dead layed thar, ther wounded escaped, an' we are ther latter."

"How many of you were there?"

"Plenty, accordin' ter our calkerlation, ter do ther biz prime; but we made a miscalculate, an' we two orphans are all thet remain o' our family o' five pussons."

"He killed three of you, then?"

"Them thet is dead thinks so, you bet, an' we what is livin' knows it."

"That was too bad, for that man ought to die."

"I have sworn to kill him, and I will keep my word!" said Captain Corduroy, in a low, stern tone that showed he was in deadly earnest in making the threat.

"That is to be proven; but are you just from Poker City?"

"Left there yesterday."

"Where were you last night?"

"In the mountains hunting for one of your men to take us in."

"Were you in Poker City when the stage came in?"

"Driven by Andy Rush?"

"Yes."

"We were."

"Did you know who arrived in it?"

"I did."

"Was there a young lady?"

"I'll swar ter that," interrupted Kit Carr, "fer I knows her."

"Who was she?"

"A gal by ther name o' Miss Insley, an' she are a petticoat terror."

"Why do you say so?"

"Waal, durin' our lively time with Wild Bill I jest skipt inter ther parlor ter put a bullet through him outer ther window, an' she were thar an' tuk me in out o' ther dampness."

"Yas, the gal arrived by ther stage, an' are in Poker City."

"Well, that is the girl I want, and if you two men get her into my power I will accept you as members in good standing in our band of the Desperado Dozen."

"You give us a hard task, sir."

"Why?"

"If we returned there we would be recognized and killed."

"Were you known in the disguise you now wear?"

"Your eyes are searching to detect that we wear a disguise," said Captain Corduroy.

"Oh! I saw that when you first came in, for I am compelled to hide my face often also."

"Remove your false beards and wigs."

Promptly they did so.

"Well, I cannot say you are much improved, for the devil in you still shows prominently."

"You are complimentary," sneered Captain Corduroy.

"I say what I mean; but come, I will prepare a disguise for you in which you can return to Poker City and defy detection, and Hyena Harry shall go with you to see that you do not play me false."

"I, captain?" asked Hyena Harry, in surprise.

"Yes."

"You know I never go anywhere other than to the Overland trail."

"True, but you will oblige me this time, when I reveal my plot, and prove to you how safely it can be carried out."

"What is your plan?" asked Hyena Harry.

What that plot was, in all its clever deviltry, the reader already knows, as he does also, of the killing of Kit Carr by the Fighting Parson, the flight of Hyena Harry, and the hanging of Captain Corduroy by Wild Bill, the very man who had sworn to take his life.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE FATE OF THE VICTIMS.

AFTER Captain Tiger had started the new members of the Desperado Dozen on their devilish errand, accompanied by Hyena Harry, who was not only a spy upon them, but also an

aid in getting Edna Insley into the power of the chief, he went first to the tent where was confined the unfortunate woman whom he had told was doomed.

"Well, sir?" she said haughtily, wholly self-possessed.

"You will not find me merciful, I assure you, Gertrude, and I have come to tell you that here you remain until you die."

She paled slightly, but answered:

"Then you intend I shall die?"

"Certainly."

"You are now determined to get rid of me?"

"Yes, because you are like a snake, and I know not when and how you will strike."

"Whenever I can, and at your heart, you monster," she said, with suppressed passion.

"That I know and shall prevent; for here, I say, you die."

"How do you intend ending my existence?"

"By starvation."

"I will live a long time then, and before I am starved, who knows but that the Desperado Dozen and their daring chief may be things of the past."

"Perhaps we may, but we take the chances."

"This is your abiding-place and death cage."

"You have eaten your last morsel on earth, and knowing what is to be your doom, you have ample time to prepare to die."

"Some weeks at least," she said, with indifference, apparently.

"It depends upon how long human nature can hold out without food."

"I could knife you, but I like not a woman's blood on my hands."

"You have become strangely virtuous then, since we last met," she sneered.

"Oh, it was imprisonment for me, or death for you, and of course I acted upon the first law of nature."

"But you have it in your power to die sooner, if the pangs of hunger become unbearable."

"How mean you?"

"Here is a deadly poison, and I leave it with you."

"It is aconite and a few drops will kill."

"Thank you, for you are merciful," she said, in a tone of withering sarcasm.

"Good-by, Gertrude, for this is our last farewell, as you will not see me again, and I care not to look upon you again in your misery."

"Use the poison if you suffer, and when you are dead I will bury you yonder in the valley, on the bank of the brook, where the wild flowers will clamber upon your grave, and the rivulet and the birds will sing requiems over you to lull you to an eternal rest."

"Good-by, dear Gertrude, sweet Gertrude, a long, a last farewell."

He kissed the tips of his fingers mockingly toward her, and turned away, leaving her white, stern and trembling with hate and passion, gazing after him as he walked down the valley, and remembering that he was the man who had, in bygone years, been her lover, and whom she had devotedly loved, whose wife she had become, and who was now divided from her by a gulf so wide, so deep, so black, that the wings of angels could not bear an atom of affection back across the yawning chasm.

Whistling an air from Norma, and assuming an indifference he could not feel and be human, Captain Tiger walked down the valley.

He soon reached the mouth of a canyon, and entering it, came upon a cavern, when his ears were greeted by a deep growl.

"Down, Death," he said, sternly, as a huge grizzly bear raised upon his hind legs at his approach.

The bear growled, or rather whined, yet made no hostile demonstrations as at first.

The bear was one of the largest of its kind, and most savage-looking, red-eyed and fierce.

He was chained securely to a tree growing at one side of the cavern, and the terrible gashes in the trunk showed how hard he had tried to free himself from his chains.

There were piles of bones about him, and the odor was most disagreeable.

Beyond him, and in the entrance of which he was lying when Captain Tiger approached, was a cave, which ran back into the solid rock about thirty feet.

It was some ten feet in diameter at the entrance, and receded like a funnel, being but four feet at the end.

A, passing the savage guard at the en-

trance, back into this cave went Captain Tiger, and before him was his second victim.

It was Boyd Insley, and he, too, was chained heavily, an iron collar being about his neck.

The chain was not long enough to allow of his standing up, but held him down like a brute.

He had been stripped of his clothing, excepting his pants, and sat staring at the man before him like one dazed.

The atmosphere of the place was most foul, and the rocks alone served as his bed, while a pile of straw in the corner was his only covering.

"Well, old man, we meet again, as in the olden time, and once more I have you just where I want you."

"Hugh Harcourt, by Heaven!" and unmindful of his chains, Mr. Insley attempted to spring upon the man, but was jerked down again with fearful force, that hurt his neck severely, and nearly stunned him.

"Yes, I am Hugh Harcourt in disguise," laughed the wretch at the other's severe fall, and he added:

"You are here to be tortured to death, if you do not reveal the secret I would know."

"Man, you have not the power to wring from me the hiding-place of my gold, so do your worst."

"We shall see."

"Ay, that we will."

"Do you see your guard?"

"That grizzly bear is more merciful than you will be, I know."

"If you could free yourself of your irons, you could never pass him."

"Perhaps not."

"Boyd Insley, you can go free this very day if you lead me to where you buried the gold your good luck gained for you, while I, digging by your side day after day, toiled in vain."

"You shall never know."

"I guess a little torture will wring from you the secret."

"I will die as stoically as does the Indian under torture, you will find."

"Wait until you feel the knife and fire."

"They are no more than the pangs of starvation which you made me suffer when I was in your power before."

"Well, then, I shall not torture you, but another."

"What other?"

"Your daughter."

"Thank God she is not in your power."

"She soon will be."

The father turned livid, and hoarsely asked:

"What do you mean, monster?"

"I have laid a trap into which she will fall, and I will torture her to wring from you the secret."

"Oh, man! man! have you no mercy!"

"Spare my child, and you shall have my gold," and the poor man was bowed with anguish.

"Then tell me the secret."

He seemed deeply moved, and said after an instant:

"I will, I will. Do you know the Umbrella Rock?"

"I have heard of such a rock in the upper valley," eagerly answered the outlaw.

"Well, go there, and— No, no, no! not now will I tell you, for after all my noble child may not fall into your accursed trap."

"No, no, Hugh Harcourt, there is one who will protect her, and yet hang you."

"You mean Wild Bill?" said Captain Tiger, and it was evident how deeply chagrined he was that the victim had not divulged his secret.

"Yes, Wild Bill will save her."

"Bah! I have laid a trap for him too, and he will be here soon, along with your daughter."

"Oh God!"

All hope seemed to leave the poor man, and he lay upon his face on the rocks, groaning bitterly, and all efforts to arouse him were unavailing.

With a curse Captain Tiger turned away, and as he retraced his steps up the valley, he muttered:

"I do hope that Hyena Harry and his allies will be successful, for I see now that with Edna Insley in my power, I can force the secret from the lips of her father."

"And the gold I must have, for this country is becoming too hot for me, and the treasure will give me a fortune at one grasp which it will take years to earn as a road-agent."

CHAPTER XXXII.

WILD BILL'S MISSION.

WHEN Wild Bill left the spot where he had visited such just, and summary punishment upon Captain Corduroy, he searched for and found the trail of Hyena Harry, who in his character of Count Carlos, had so hastily left the scene of combat, when the Fighting Parson had charged upon the villains.

That Hyena Harry was a brave man, red as was his heart, no one would doubt; but in his past life he had done deeds which were punishable by hanging, and he had a superstitious dread of the rope, though he would face foes with revolvers at any time where there was a chance of escape.

He had believed the Vigilantes were upon them, and instantly spurred away, for he could not think that one man, and that man a preacher, would dare attack three, unless aid was behind him.

He had only gone to Poker City, when he felt secure in his disguise as a foreign noble, but all the time had felt nervous of there being an avenger upon his track.

He made it a rule never to leave the stronghold, to go further than the Overland trail, to attack a coach, and when Harvey Haviland charged upon them, after one shot which failed to bring the daring parson down, his only desire was to get back into the retreat and he forced his horse through the forest at a breakneck speed.

Wild Bill having found his trail, at once started off at a right angle, and disappeared in the forest.

But before long he returned, and was mounted upon his matchless black Midnight.

"As I thought, the trail wears round and goes back to the stronghold.

"Now if I can only keep it I will be all right," muttered Wild Bill.

But, after a few miles' ride, splendid trailer and skillful prairie and mountain man that he was, he could not follow the trail across some rocks, where not a vestige of a trace was left, the outlaw having evidently there muffled the hoofs of his horse.

"It is just where I was at fault before," he said with chagrin, and for some moments stood lost in deep thought.

"Yes, it is my best course, and I will go at once and get the aid of the Red Dove and a couple of her best warriors, for her people are huntin' only a sharp half day's ride from here, and she must be with them.

"Miss Insley is safe, and that parson will take care of her, and I can do nothing alone to rescue her father and that unfortunate lady.

"But with the Red Dove and a few of her braves that can trail a bird, I shall ferret out this stronghold of the Desperado Dozen.

"Come, Midnight, we must push ahead, old horse, and I want you to do your best."

The intelligent horse seemed to understand his master well and set off at a fast pace.

After several hours, quick travel the mountains were left behind and the prairie was reached.

But, darkness coming on, and no sign of the Indian hunters being seen, Wild Bill determined to camp for the night, and after a frugal supper lay down to sleep, with his blanket for a bed, and his saddle for a pillow, while Midnight cropped the juicy grass near.

With the first glimmer of dawn Wild Bill awoke, took a bath in a prairie stream, ate his breakfast, and by the time it was good light, was going across the prairie at a swift pace.

For some hours he rode on, now on the prairie, now in the hill-land, and suddenly drew rein.

He heard the fall of hoofs, and saw dash into view, making for the hills, a large herd of buffalo.

Behind them were scores of Indian hunters, yet not near enough to bring any of the animals down.

A glance at the herd, showed Wild Bill that the buffaloes were comparatively fresh.

A look at the Indians discovered that their horses were tired and that they were dropping back, and must lose their game.

"Yes, they are Sioux from old Black Bear's village, and I will do them a good turn," he said.

Unslung his repeating rifle from his saddle, he got himself and horse well together, and, like an arrow from a bow, dashed out into the midst of the large herd.

They swerved wildly, but the daring hunter

went into their thickest ranks, and at every crack of his rifle a buffalo fell.

Reloading as he rode along in their midst, he again emptied his rifle, and then his revolvers, and the herd passed on, leaving him in the rear, and half a hundred of their number dead upon the prairie behind them.

The Indians had drawn rein, at seeing a white hunter dash out from the shelter of the hills; but evidently recognizing him, they gave shouts of welcome, and came on as rapidly as their tired ponies could bring them.

As they dashed up to where Wild Bill stood by his horse awaiting them, he addressed them in their own tongue, and said:

"I saw that my red brothers' ponies were tired, so killed some game for them.

"It is all for my Sioux brothers."

They were astounded and delighted at the havoc the mighty hunter had made in the herd, for the idea that one man, in a single run, and in a few minutes, could kill half a hundred buffaloes, had never entered their heads, and Wild Bill, their friend, and the white brother of their head chief and their queen, Red Dove, was still the more exalted as a mighty hunter and great brave.

"Is the Black Bear's village near?" he asked.

They pointed to a far distant clump of timber, and a warrior said:

"The tepees of the great chief are there."

"Is the Red Dove with the hunters, or back in the village of the tribe in the mountains?"

"The Red Dove is there."

"Good!" and Wild Bill rode rapidly on, leaving the Indians to bring the game into camp.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

BLACK BEAR AND RED DOVE.

THE village of the Sioux hunters was pitched in a pleasant grove of timber, through which ran a crystal stream.

Very few of the squaws of the tribe were along, and none of the papposes, they having been left in the head village of their people in the mountains.

Their chief, Black Bear, was a man far above the average in intelligence; and having had for his wife a white maiden, the daughter of a settler, and who had sacrificed herself to save the settlement from fire and rapine at the Indians' hands, he had become, in a manner, civilized.

His daughter, the child of his white wife, was the queen of the village, and her beauty and lovely character deservedly won for her that rank, even had not her father's rank done so.

She was a maiden still in her teens, and both form and face were exquisitely lovely, she having inherited all of her mother's beauty and grace.

Taught by that mother differently from what the others of her sex were, she had thoughts and feelings which never entered the minds of her companions.

Her father made her his idol, though his dead son, Iron Eyes, the child of an Indian wife was ever in his thoughts.

It had been better, perhaps, for Red Dove had she been allowed to grow up an untutored savage, and not had her finer feelings and nature cultivated by her mother, for then she would not have suffered in mind and heart as she had been made to suffer.

Her beauty made her the object of admiration in the hearts of all the young warriors, and even old chiefs, while it caused her to attract the gaze of Hugh Harcourt, who, under the name of the Lone Pale-face, was then living a hermit life near the Indian camp.

The father of Red Dove's mother, who had cowardly allowed the sacrifice made by his daughter, to save his own life and riches, had bitterly repented in after years, and when dying, had left to her child, his grandchild, whom he had heard lived in the Indian camp, his fortune, and she at once became the game which a city lawyer, who was the executor, intended to run down.

His plan was to make her his wife and thereby gain her fortune.

His pilgrimage to the far West, his finding of the Indian maiden, and carrying her to St. Louis, with her half-brother, Iron Eyes, is all told in the story preceding this one, and entitled "Wild Bill's Trump Card, or The Indian Heiress," as is also the fact that, finding her husband meant her harm only, and that he had killed her half-brother, Iron Eyes, to get him out of the way, she became an avenger,

and took the life of the man who had so injured and deceived her to gain her gold, and the gallows would have been her end, had not Wild Bill gone to St. Louis, bribed Dan Dale, then the prison-keeper, and rescued her from death.

It was no wonder then Lone Star loved the white chief with all her heart, for before that had Wild Bill saved her from cruel foes, and her whole heart went forth to him, though she knew he loved her not.

This hopeless love, and the shadow of the past hanging over her, was the sorrow of her heart, and in the wild life she led among her people, and which she had come back to after her escape from prison, she loved far more than the butterfly existence she had led in the city.

In roaming the vast prairies and trackless mountains, she tried to forget her sorrows, and loving devotedly her Indian father, she devoted herself to him.

Recognizing the black steed and rider coming across the prairie at a sweeping gallop, Red Dove gave a cry of joy, which brought her father from his tepee.

She was preparing breakfast, and a frugal meal it was, as the hunters had been very unsuccessful in getting game, and instantly she left all and bounded forward like a deer to meet Wild Bill.

But, seemingly forgetting herself, and that her act might appear unmaidenly in the eyes of the white chief, she returned to the fire in front of her tepee and awaited his coming, while Black Bear advanced to receive him.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

RED ALLIES.

"The Great White Chief is welcome.

"Black Bear offers him his hand and heart," said the chief, with dignity, and he grasped both of Wild Bill's hands, as he sprung from his horse.

Red Dove would have given her life, with her heart, dared she offer it; but, checking the impulse that made her desire to give the one man in the world to her, the greeting which her heart dictated, she said simply:

"The white brother knows how glad the Red Dove is to see him."

"And I am glad to find both the Black Bear and the Red Dove here, for I have come to see them," answered Wild Bill.

Just then a Sioux brave rode up with some choice pieces of buffalo-meat, and he told the chief, in a few words, of the marvelous run of the white hunter in the herd, and Black Bear said:

"My white brother is always great, and we owe to him many thanks, for we were hungry."

"If your hunters will go with me on my return, I will show them where they can get game enough to fill their tepees," said Wild Bill.

"The chief is kind, and we will all go.

"Now let the Red Dove give us food that our white brother has brought us."

But Red Dove was already at work preparing breakfast and working with a will, that their honored guest might fare as sumptuously as he could.

After a substantial breakfast, which Red Dove seemed to enjoy immensely also, Wild Bill sat in silence, and both father and daughter knew that he had something to communicate, and the maiden filled pipes and handed them to Black Bear and their guest.

Then all sat in silence for some moments.

Wild Bill noted, as he glanced into the faces of his red friends, that the eyes of Red Dove seemed to have grown more sad and dreary since the last time he had seen her, and about her mouth was a look of sternness that ill became the full, pouting lips.

She had gone back wholly to her Indian costume in dress, but it was richly worked, made of the finest tanned skins, and was certainly most becoming to her.

Her father's face, too, seemed to have grown much older and sterner, and there was a far-away look in his face, when in repose, that seemed as though his thoughts were in the grave with his son, his noble, brave, Indian boy, whom he had so hoped would one day rule the tribe.

"I have come to ask the Red Dove a favor," said Wild Bill, after a long silence, in which he puffed calmly at his tomahawk pipe.

"The Red Dove grants it before it is asked," was the low reply.

"Has she any of her warriors with her?"
 "She has a score of the hunters who were of the Iron Eyes band, and now call her their chief."

"I wish the Red Dove and four of her braves to go on a war trail with me, if the Black Bear does not object."

"The Red Dove is the sister of the white chief, and he has taken the place in her heart as the Iron Eyes, so she can go where she will with her brother," said Black Bear, calmly, and little dreaming that the sisterly love of Red Dove for Wild Bill was only a mask to hide her deeper feelings.

"The Red Dove will go, and four, or more, of her warriors shall accompany her, if so the white chief wishes," said the maiden.

"No, four are enough, for the Red Dove is equal to as many more, and her aid and advice will be all that I wish."

"What trail does the white chief follow?" asked Black Bear, in a way that seemed to show it was of little interest to him.

"The Black Bear has heard of the wicked white band under the chief, Captain Tiger?"

Black Bear nodded.

"The Tiger chief has captured friends of mine, and his stronghold is so hidden that I cannot find it."

"The eyes of my warriors will be blind if the white chief cannot see a trail."

"No, for they can aid me if we cannot find it."

"The chief knows best," said Black Bear.

"The Tiger chief has taken my friends to his stronghold, and I wish to rescue them."

"I have disguises to make me an old man, and I will seek the retreat of the bad pale-faces, and Red Dove and her braves will help me."

"The Red Dove will do all she can," said the maiden.

"Is she well mounted?"

"Yes; her pony is near."

"And her braves?"

"She will pick the best, and those whose ponies are fresh."

"It is well."

"I thank the Black Bear and the Red Dove, and before the shadows are straight we must be on our way."

That meant noon, and before that hour Wild Bill, with Red Dove by his side, and four red allies following, rode out of the camp, and held their way toward the mountains, through which ran the Overland trail.

CHAPTER XXXV.

TRAILERS AT FAULT.

WHEN the scouts who were with the mining party under Harvey Haviland, and the best of whom was Andy Rush, the stage-driver, set to work to follow the trail of the horseman who had escaped, they were surprised to find the tracks of a second horse following the outlaw.

This in a measure accounted for the remarkable discovery of the man hanging by the lariat and showed that it was the work of one person alone.

They had not gone very far before both trails were distinctly visible crossing some soft ground, and here Andy Rush came to a halt.

"Boys," he said, in his quiet way. "I reads these signs now purty plain."

"Well, Andy?" asked the parson.

"Thar are ther diff'rence o' a hour or so between ther makin' of 'em."

"That we all knows," said a listener.

"Ther fust am made by ther outlaw who got when ther parson tackled 'em."

"Yes."

"Ther second I recognizes."

"You know who left the trail, Andy?" asked Harvey Haviland, evident from the stage-driver's assured manner that he had made some important discovery, but would take his own way of making it known.

"It were a horse."

"That is evident; but who was his rider?"

"You seen a man hangin' back yonder?"

"Yes."

"Waal, ther rider o' ther horse thet left this trail strung thet feller up."

"But who was he, Andy?"

"Waal, he are a man thet makes it useless fer us ter continuo our trailin', lest we wants ter find only dead meat."

"Why so?"

"'Cause he are a feller thet calls in more chips than any gerlout in these heur diggin's, an' his name are Wild Bill."

All started, and every voice whispered the name:

"Wild Bill!"

"Fact."

"Are you sure?"

"I knows ther tracks o' his animile, Mid-night, same as I does my own, Pard Parson."

"Then you think he is fully capable of taking care of the outlaw?"

"Yas, an' he are capable o' takin' keer o' ther whole capoodlum o' outlaw varmints ef he gits a fa'r an' squar' fight out o' 'em."

"From what I have seen and heard of the noted ranchero, I believe you are right, Andy; but at any rate we will press on to see if we can make any discovery."

This decision of the Fighting Parson set the party on the forward trail once more, and Andy Rush and the other skilled prairie and mountain men followed the tracks without any apparent difficulty.

It led through the wildest part of the mountain, and so unswervingly that it was evident the outlaw had his bearings down well and was heading for some direct point.

As unswervingly the trail of Wild Bill followed, until at last both grew more dim when the harder, flinty ground was reached, and the trailers halted, wholly at fault.

In vain did they exert their entire skill to discover some trace of those they followed.

It was useless, and an hour's search, by every one of the party, proved that the trail was irrevocably lost.

"But what had Wild Bill done?"

That was the general query.

He was not a man to give up a trail he had once set out upon, and, if he had not discovered some trace to follow up, why then did they not find him there still looking for it?

This unanswerable question set them all to searching once more, but again without result.

The outlaw could not have had more than an hour's start of them at first, and yet he left no trail further than they then were.

Wholly at fault, the trailers were forced to give up a further advance and set out upon their return to Poker City.

But they swore earnestly that they would reorganize as a band of Vigilantes and yet hunt down the Desperado Dozen.

"Yas, yer'll do it, ef Wild Bill don't save yer ther trouble."

"But as fer me, I continuoos ter drive ther old horse over ther Overland an' trust in luck," muttered Andy Rush, as all started on the back trail, greatly disappointed at not having a brush with Captain Tiger and his men.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

RED RUTH'S DISCOVERY.

THE party of miners had hardly ridden away from the spot, where Parson Haviland had humanely buried the outlaws, when the ring of hoofs was heard coming down the mountain side.

It was an Indian pony, wiry, quick-footed, and evidently fleet, while its hide was glossy, as though well groomed, and white as snow.

Upon the back of the pony was a rider, and from a distant point the movements of the miners had been plainly visible to her, for it was a woman.

Once before the reader has met the horse-woman, and cannot fail now to recognize Red Ruth.

"I will see who it is they have hanged and buried," she muttered, as she rode up to the new-made grave.

From her distant point of observation she had seen them cut down a human form, that had been hanged to a limb, and bury it.

She had reached the spot where she halted and observed them, just as they lowered the form, and consequently believed that they had also strung it up.

Seeing that the miners had started off rapidly, evidently following a trail, Red Ruth dismounted from her pony, and taking her knife from her belt, at once began to throw out the soft earth of the new-made grave.

It was not very deep, and had been loosely thrown in, and she was but a short while coming to the clothing that covered a form.

She seized it and drew out the body.

"Ha! it is the companion of Dudley Duncan, and called himself Kit."

"I wonder where he is."

She now discovered that the grave contained a second body, and instantly she set to work again and soon dragged out the form of the other.

"God in Heaven! he is yet warm," she cried, and she placed her fingers upon the pulse.

But there came no pulsation to her touch.

Yet he was not cold as was the other, and she bent over and laid her head upon his breast, just over the heart.

"He lives!"

She fairly shouted the words, and at once she set to work, chafing the swollen neck and rubbing hard to create circulation.

For a long time she believed her efforts would be in vain; but at last the beat quickened, and a sigh came from between the stern lips.

Harder she worked, and soon after the eyes opened.

There was only a vacant stare in them, a shudder shook the frame, and then the man lay as though asleep.

"He shall live," she said with almost savage earnestness.

"I wonder why he was here, and in this rig, when I believed him in the camp of Captain Tiger?" she said, asking herself the question aloud.

At last, after she had held a flask of liquor to the lips, and bathed the face and neck with cold water from the rivulet, the eyes of Dudley Duncan opened again, and he recognized her.

"Red Ruth," he said in a hoarse whisper.

"Yes."

"Where am I?"

"Safe."

He shuddered, and, after a pause said:

"But am I not dead?"

"You don't look it."

"Am I dreaming?"

She pricked him with the end of her bowie, while she said:

"Do you feel that?"

"I certainly do."

"Dead men do not feel pain; but you made a narrow miss of it."

"Yes, I remember now I met Wild Bill."

"Ha! he then was at the head of the miners?"

"No he was alone."

"Alone! why there were twenty of them."

"Twenty what?"

"Miners."

"No, Red Ruth, he was alone, and he did the work by himself."

"What work?"

"Hanging me."

"Do you mean to say that Wild Bill alone mastered and hanged you?"

"I do."

"Who, then, was that party who just left?"

"I do not know."

"Ah! I forgot you were strung up, and Wild Bill doubtless left you for dead."

"I expect so."

"And the miners found you?"

"So I suppose if they were here."

"Here! why, man, they buried you!"

"Buried me?"

He turned livid, for his eyes now fell upon his dirt-begrimed clothes and the yawning grave, upon the edge of which lay Kit Carr.

"Yes, they buried you and your pard Kit there."

"Oh, God!"

"It is awful; and I am glad my woman's curiosity saved you, for I wished to see whom they had buried and dug you up."

"Kit was stone dead, but you felt warm, and then I set to work to resuscitate you."

"Red Ruth, I am your slave henceforth in life."

"No; I want no man for my slave."

"But come, take a pull at this flask and then shake yourself together, for I wish to know how it is I find you here and in this rig, when you left my cabin in a far different one?"

He staggered to his feet and after several efforts partially cast off the horror upon him and regained in a measure his strength.

Then he told Red Ruth of his mission and the flight of Hyena Harry.

"That man?" she said, hoarsely.

"Yes, Ruth; and I intended to gain his confidence, and then as soon as possible get him into your power."

"Now, as he cowardly deserted me, flying from one man, I am doubly anxious to place him in your hands and leave him to your tender mercies."

"Do so, and the debt you owe me for pulling you out of the grave and bringing you back to life will be more than repaid."

"I will do it."

"And Wild Bill?"

"Curse him! I have the more cause to hate him now."

"One would think so," she said, dryly.

"But what am I to do now, Ruth?"

"Return to the stronghold of the Desperado Dozen."

"But I am on foot."

"Ride my pony to within half a mile of the sentinel, and I will walk."

"Then you can go on alone; and my advice is to cultivate Hyena Harry, and not quarrel with him for leaving you, for if you should kill that man, Dudley Duncan, I would take your life, so help me Heaven!"

He saw that she was in deadly earnest, and said no more, and after reburying Kit Carr the two set off up the mountain, the man, who was still very weak and shaky from his hanging and the horror of being buried, riding the mustang, while Red Ruth walked on ahead, her eyes lowered as though she was lost in deepest meditation.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE PARSON AND THE HEATHEN CHINEE.

THE excitement in Poker City at the return of Dan Dale with Edna Insley, accompanied by Slick Sam, who smiled in spite of his wounds and pains as though he were the hero of the hour, was at fever-heat when all of the particulars became known.

Why the foreigners had made the attack upon Edna no one could understand any more than they could who they were.

The escape of one of them, and death, as Dan Dale and Edna then believed, of the two others, would of course keep the secret hidden.

But when at night the parson and his company returned, and reported finding but one dead in the road and the other hanging by a lariat, with no trace of the one who escaped, the excitement was greatly increased and the mystery intensified.

Of course there could be little rest in Poker City under such circumstances, and Carrots did a most lucrative business in dispensing liquors.

In fact, so great was the rush upon the bar that Andy Rush enlisted as an *aide pro tem.*, and then even they both had to sing out continually:

"No mixed drinks ter-night, gents, fer thar are no time to mix 'em."

"Drink yer licker straight, or not at all."

Of course this decision disappointed few in Poker City, for it was only when the sports of that festive place wished to "put on style" that they were wont to call for "cock-tails," "gin-slugs," and "punches."

As soon as he could get away from his office duties, and from the recital of the circumstances of the attack, and the fact that Wild Bill was on the outlaws' trail, Dan Dale slipped up-stairs and knocked at Edna's door.

"Come in," came the prompt reply, and upon entering the really not uncomfortable little parlor, he found the maiden pacing to and fro, pale and excited.

"Oh, Mr. Dale, is there any great trouble down-stairs?" she asked.

"No, miss, only the boys discussing the affair in the mountains to-day, and betting on Wild Bill."

"Betting on Wild Bill?" she asked with a start.

"Yes, miss, for the parson has come back with his company, and they report that they found the man who called himself Baron Bronx hanging to a tree."

"Hanged?" she said with horror.

"Yes, miss."

"But he was killed by the shot fired by the Reverend Mister Haviland."

"So we thought; but they found one of them dead, the other hanging by a lariat, and following the trail of Count Carlos, who deserted his pards, they saw that Wild Bill was ahead of them."

"Ahead of them?"

"Yes, miss."

"Did they see him?"

"No, miss."

"Then how did they know?"

"They recognized his trail."

"How, may I ask?"

"Well, Andy Rush knows his horse's track well, and as there were two trails, one following the one who ran away when the parson came to your rescue, they said it was Wild Bill's."

"And did they leave that brave man to go on alone?"

"Oh, they had to."

"Had to?"

"You see they lost both trails, and had to give them up, and now the boys are betting heavily whether Wild Bill will trail the fellow to the end, or not."

"If he is on his track, I feel confident he will run him down; but if Mr. Hikok is there, he cannot have seen my poor father in the hands of those mountain fiends."

"Don't lose heart, Miss Insley, for Bill knows what he is about."

"But I forgot to ask you if you would go with the parson and myself to look over the luggage of those foreigners, to see if we can make any discovery that may give a clew to their attack on you?"

"Certainly if you wish it, I will go with you, Mr. Dale."

The Governor only cared to have two witnesses to his opening the luggage of his strange guests, and calling up the parson, the three went to the rooms of the trio who had decamped so suddenly and behaved in such a villainous manner.

The two dogs they had brought with them were vicious brutes, and sprung at them with savage intent, as though they intended to guard the rooms and do their duty, be their masters what they might.

Coaxing was tried, but it was useless, and a Chinese waiter was summoned to bring food, and the brutes seemed to prefer Heathen flesh to beef, and the frightened fellow barely escaped a severe bite, by a quick and unerring shot from the parson, who sent a bullet crashing through the dog's brain.

"That's right, parson, finish up the other one," cried Dan Dale, and the death of the second dog followed the next report of the revolver.

"You are a superb shot, sir," said Edna, with admiration at the unerring aim of a man who wore the garb of a clergyman.

"I have had much practice in the past, Miss Insley," was the quiet response, and the three now entered the rooms, while the Chinese servant, chattering dolefully, dragged off the bodies of the dogs, and surprised the kitchen brigade by suddenly appearing before them, staggering under the load of a dead brute upon either shoulder, and telling a glib lie of how he had killed them.

"Long Chin liee allee samee likee Melican man," muttered Slick Sam, who was seated upon a cushion telling over and over his adventures, for if the truth must be told, he found it most uncomfortable sitting down at all after his long and rough ride.

Long Chin seemed to appreciate that Slick Sam told the truth about him, whatever he might have done about himself, and quickly passed on with his hideous trophies of the parson's aim, while he muttered as he disappeared:

"Slickee Samee say me liee allee samee likee Melican man, and Slickee Samee he liee allee samee likee me."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

UNCONNECTED LINKS.

THE "luggage" of the trio of strangers, upon being overhauled by the "Governor" of the Hikok Hotel, was seen to consist of three serapes, a few extra arms, and some carpet-bags containing precious little wearing apparel, and mostly stuffed with blankets.

With such an outfit, it was evident they had not intended remaining a great length of time, and, as far as the value was concerned, they could have all they had without really missing it.

"Parson, the more I discover about those rascals the more I think they were playing a part," said Dan.

"I am also convinced that they were not foreigners, nor what they represented themselves, but came here for a purpose," answered the parson.

"It certainly looks so; and the purpose they failed to carry out, thanks to your courage and timely aid, Mr. Haviland," warmly said Edna.

"Thank God they did: but do you remember to have seen any of them before, Miss Insley?"

"Never, sir."

"You cannot find a scrap of paper, can you, Mr. Dale, to identify them?"

"Not as yet—yes, here is an envelope in this sachel, and it is addressed,

"CAPTAIN DUDLEY DUNCAN,
Denver, Colorado."

The parson took it and said:

"See, there is a scrap of paper in the envelope."

Taking it out he read as follows:

"DEAR CAP:—I find that W. B. now has a ranch near Poker City, where he has won a name that causes him to be greatly feared."

"By going to Poker City, you can find out all about him; but go slow, for he has many friends there, who would be only too glad to do him a good turn, by helping him put a foe out of the way."

"This news is reliable."

Yours,

"DICK."

"Well, who is W. B.?" asked the parson.

"Wild Bill, sir."

"Right you are, Miss Insley, and the name of Bill's foe, who came here with four pards to kill him, was Dudley Duncan, though his comrades called him Captain Corduroy," remarked Dan.

"And what has he to do with the Baron, the Count and their servant?" asked Parson Haviland.

"I have it, for I recall the face now; the servant of those pretended noblemen was none other than the man I captured in the parlor, and the others were comrades in mischief."

"Right again, Miss Insley, yet why you were their object of attack, I cannot understand," said Dan Dale.

It was a mystery they could not solve, but it was very evident they had come to the hotel for the carrying out of some deep-laid plot, and around them the mystery must hang, until some one cleared it up, who could better fathom their motives, than any one then in Poker City.

Returning to her room Edna sought the rest she so much needed, and in spite of her suspense, sorrows, and the wild excitement down-stairs, sunk fast to sleep.

But Harvey Haviland sought his little sanctum, and until the night was far spent, sat thinking over the deeds of the day, and rejoicing that his hand had been the one to save the lovely girl a second time from the merciless and untiring foe that seemed to be determined to get possession of her.

"Ah me! I fear she is beyond my reach, for that she loves another my heart tells me."

"But, loving her as I do I feel a certain joy, and I can almost say with truth that

"'Tis better to have loved and lost,
Than never to have loved at all."

As though he had his nerves well schooled, the handsome and daring young parson then threw himself down upon his bed, banished all thought, and was soon asleep, dreaming that he again saved Edna Insley from her foes.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

STRIKING THE RIGHT TRAIL.

I MUST now return to Wild Bill, whom I left with Red Dove and her warriors, riding toward the mountains, in which was the stronghold of the Desperado Dozen.

Back to the spot where he had lost the trail of Hyena Harry, Wild Bill led the Indians, and there explained how he had followed it to that point, and then been thrown wholly off the scent.

He also stated that he was convinced that the secret retreat of the Desperado Dozen could not be further than half a score of miles from where they then were.

The warriors went into a canyon near by and lariatied out their horses, as though with the determination to "camp on that trail," until they made some discovery.

Red Dove prepared dinner, and after all had eaten, she began to take a close examination of the surroundings.

Wild Bill having looked the whole place over carefully and most thoroughly, before he gave it up, stood watching the maiden and her warriors, determined to await the result of their skillful and cunning investigation.

After a long and close search the braves came to where Red Dove stood, and Wild Bill walked forward and joined them.

"What say my warriors?" quietly asked Red Dove.

One of the number shook his head and answered:

"Pony and pale-face like bird, and left no trail."

So it seemed when none of them could find the slightest trace of which way Hyena Harry had taken, after reaching the bottom of a stony hill.

Wild Bill smiled and seemed to feel that he

was not to blame for losing the trail, when four of the most skillful trailers in the Sioux village could not follow it, or account for its mysterious disappearance.

All saw, however, that Red Dove had made some discovery, for the expression upon her beautiful face plainly said so.

"What says the Red Dove?" asked Wild Bill.

"That the eyes of the Red Dove see more than the white chief and her warriors," was the smiling response.

"You then have discovered a trace?"

"Yes."

"Where?" and both Wild Bill and the Indians looked in surprise and admiration upon her.

"Come," she said simply and she led the party to where the very last trace of Hyena Harry's trail was visible.

"See," she said pointing to a track which only an extraordinary vision could discover, and one wholly skilled in woodcraft.

"Well, here I lose all trace," said Wild Bill.

"The eyes of the braves of the Red Dove can see no more," said one of the warriors.

"Could the pony of the outlaw fly?" she asked.

All shook their heads.

"See, even the moccasin foot of the Red Dove can make a mark here," she said, and twisting her little foot, she did leave a sign which the braves could have followed had it continued on as distinctly.

"Well, this is the cunning of the wicked pale-face," said Red Dove.

"How mean you, Red Dove?" asked Bill.

"He purposely destroyed his trail here."

"But which way could he go, for see, had he gone up the canyon he certainly would have left traces, even had he muffled the hoofs of his horse."

"He did not go up the canyon."

"The hill there, he could not descend even on foot."

"He did not go that way."

"Which way, then?"

"Back again over his trail."

"But we would have seen his tracks."

"Not if they were muffled."

"Ha! you have struck it, and I was blind not to have seen it before."

"Come, let us see how far back he went."

They followed Wild Bill at a swift pace, and after going the fourth of a mile, they came upon a place that looked as though one might branch off there and go into the upper range of mountains.

No trail was visible, but bounding on ahead, like hounds on the scent, the Indians soon gave cry, and hastening forward, Wild Bill and Red Dove found them bending over and closely examining the ground.

Arriving at the spot, they saw the tracks of the outlaw more plainly visible, and looking as though from the sudden manner in which they began, he had alighted there from mid-air.

"Well, Red Dove, you are the Queen of Trailers, that is evident, and now we can go on easily."

"Some one else has been following the trail since I was here, and had to give it up, so we must cover up as well as we can the discovery we have made," and Wild Bill led the way back to the little camp.

The horses were then saddled and their feet muffled, after which they were led up the hill to the point where the tracks of the outlaw's steed again became visible.

Here the mufflers were taken off, and all mounting, readily followed the track left by the outlaw.

After a ride of several miles they came upon a wild and rugged canyon with a flooring of solid rock, through which the trail led, yet where not the slightest sign was visible.

Here a halt was made, a camping-place was found near by, and all set to work to discover what cunning device the outlaw had taken to cover up his tracks.

A search resulted in the discovery that the canyon branched off into mountain passes of the wildest nature, and not one of them was there but was too hard to leave even the mark of an iron hoof.

Beyond the entrance to the canyon some distance, Wild Bill descried a well-worn trail, and instantly he called to all of his red allies to join him.

"See, the trail leads toward the Overland, and we are right."

"It goes into the canyon, and there is lost; but we can wait here, for some one must soon come along, and then we will know more."

This seemed sound sense, and an Indian was at once stationed on watch, while the others went into camp.

Several hours thus passed away, and Wild Bill went himself to relieve the sentinel, and had hardly taken his place when he descried a horseman approaching.

It was a white man, well mounted and well armed, and an outlaw it certainly must be, for who else could be alone in that wild and dangerous region but one of the Desperado Dozen.

CHAPTER XL.

A BANDIT'S HONOR.

SHRINKING back within the shelter of the pine thicket that concealed him, and from which point he had a fine view up and down the canyon, Wild Bill drew his revolver.

But a moment after, as though changing his mind, he laid it down by his side, and uncoiled his lariat from over his shoulder.

This he took well in hand, and waited with perfect calmness the coming of the horseman.

The man rode leisurely along, as though he neither dreaded danger, or expected it, in that place, and his horse cropped here and there a bunch of grass as he passed, the act unchecked by his rider.

He was a young man, for his face had only a very short growth of beard, and he did not look like one who would select a crime-stained life in preference to an honest one.

He was dressed in dark pants, stuck in top boots, a shirt of blue flannel, with a red silk handkerchief tied natty under his collar, and wore on his head a black sombrero, in which was stuck a plume.

Whatever he might be, bandit, miner, scout, or cowboy, he was evidently considerably of a dandy.

His horse was a good one, his accouterments handsome, and his revolvers were large, evidently intended for use, and were silver-mounted.

As if determining upon his course, after taking a good look at the approaching horseman, Wild Bill fastened one end of his lariat securely to the stump of a mountain pine, and held the noose end ready to throw at the proper moment.

At last, going along at his leisure gait, the horse was opposite to the ambush of the ranchero, and, quickly as lightning, the lariat was launched into the air.

Without waiting to see the result, but as though knowing what it would be, Wild Bill bounded from his place of concealment, just as the noose settled over the head of the startled animal.

The horse bounded forward, but the lariat became taut with a loud twang, and reined him back upon his haunches, just as Wild Bill's iron gripe was upon the rider, dragging him from his saddle.

The man, wholly taken by surprise, was upon his back on the ground, with Wild Bill bending over him, before he had known how it all happened, or had time to more than drop his hand upon his revolver butt.

"You are my prisoner, sir," said Wild Bill sternly.

"And who the devil are you?"

"Wild Bill. You may have heard the name," was the quiet response.

It was evident from the start of the prisoner that he had heard the name.

"Why have you committed this outrage upon an honest traveler?" asked the horseman in indignant tones.

"Oh, you must expect outrages from Captain Tiger's men."

"Captain Tiger's men? Are you one of that gang?" asked the man in such an innocent manner that Wild Bill was staggered.

But he answered quickly, to see the effect:

"No, I am not, but you are."

"How dare you accuse me of being such a wretch?"

"Bah! you act well; but I have no time to lose listening to protestations of innocence, so say quickly who and what you are."

"An honest man."

"Then you belie your looks."

"You have me in your power, so insult me with impunity."

"No, for I shall make any atonement in my power if I wrong you; but I do not feel that I do, but shall soon know."

"You shall suffer for this, sir."

"I am willing to take the consequences," and Wild Bill gave the signal which was agreed upon as a call for help, between himself and his red allies.

The signal was promptly answered and a minute had hardly passed before Red Dove and her warriors glided upon the scene almost as silently as specters.

As sight of them the prisoner's face became still more pallid, while they appeared most delighted to see that Wild Bill had made a capture.

"Dove, I have ensnared this gentleman; as you see, and I intend to search him for proof of what he is, for he claims a virtue I do not give him credit for, so let your warriors bind him."

The skillful and rapid manner in which this request was complied with proved that the Sioux braves were adepts at binding prisoners, and convinced the captive that he had indeed fallen into the hands of the Philistines.

To "go through" his pockets took Wild Bill but a moment, and the contents were of a varied and interesting character.

A silk handkerchief was the first thing that made its appearance, and then followed some cartridges, a pack of cards, a bag of gold-dust, a few slugs of the precious metal, a bunch of keys, a pen-knife, a watch and chain, and upon his finger was a seal ring, while a diamond stud glittered in his shirt front, sparkling brilliantly with the dark woolen shirt as a background.

A bundle of letters were also found, well worn, as though read very often and addressed in a woman's hand to:

"CHARLES CHAMBERS, ESQUIRE,

Fort McPherson,

Nebraska."

"Young man, these things give you the lie, for this watch, ring and diamond stud, I recognize as the property of Mr. Boyd Insley, a gentleman whom I think you can aid me in finding."

"You are mistaken, Mr. Wild Bill, for I can do no such thing," was the blunt reply.

"Do you mean cannot, or will not?"

"Any way you please."

"I will take it the latter."

"So be it, I will not."

"Perhaps you may change your mind."

"Not I," was the bold assertion.

"We shall see when I set my pack to worrying you."

"You speak boldly, Charles Chambers, Esquire."

The man started at the mention of a name he had evidently not heard spoken for years, and his lips quivered as he asked:

"How is it that you know me, when I am sure we have never met before?"

"I hit center then when I called you by the name I saw upon these envelopes."

He gave a sigh of relief, and said earnestly:

"Whatever you take leave me those, for they are from my poor mother whom I love better than all else in this world."

"If you love her so dearly you should have let that love kept you from wrong doing," sternly said Wild Bill.

"Bah! don't you preach, for if you have never done wrong, it is because you have never been tempted as I have."

There was that about the man, outlaw though he was, that won the sympathy of the ranchero, and Wild Bill said in response:

"True, no man can judge another's actions; but as you are now one of the Desperado Dozen, you must expect to suffer the consequences."

"And I will."

"They will be severe."

"So be it."

"Are you not afraid to die?"

"No."

"You speak like a brave man."

"I am more afraid to live, and yet I would not seek death, for I have a hope of one day repenting and—but I am making a fool of myself, so do your worst, for I am ready to face the alternative."

Wild Bill gazed into the bold, handsome face, and upon the firmly knit form, and thought what a splendid man he might have made, had he not gone astray, and he said in a tone of real feeling:

"I am sorry for you, for the alternative can only be death."

"Be it what it may I will meet it unflinchingly."

"And yet there may be a way to save your life and gain your liberty."

"What are your terms?" was the blunt query.

"You know the road to the secret retreat of Captain Tiger and his band?"

"I do."

"Lead us there and you shall go free."

"Mr. Wild Bill, you mistake your man, for though I am a bandit, I have honor, and though my comrades are the vilest of the vile I will not betray them to save my own life."

The words rung out from the heart, and brought from Wild Bill earnestly:

"By Heavens! I like you, young man."

"Thank you," was the cool reply, and the dark blue eyes of the prisoner roamed admiringly over the face of Red Dove.

CHAPTER XL.

TRUE GRIT.

"WELL, Mr. Charley Chambers, I cannot but respect the—"

"Hold! you have discovered the name I bore as an honorable man, and while my poor mother still believes me to be unsullied, so I beg of you not to speak it here again in these wilds," said the outlaw earnestly.

"Certainly I will oblige you."

"But by what name are you known to your comrades?"

"Reckless Charley they call me."

"That is better perhaps here, where most men seem to dodge their Christian appellation as they do the officers of the law, and, from your appearance I do not doubt but that you won your sobriquet honestly, if you don't get your living that way."

"So, Mister Reckless Charley, I cannot but respect, as I was saying, the honor you show toward your outlaw pals, yet it does not do me any good, or those who are sufferers at your hands."

"I must serve my comrades above all else."

"That may be, and I must serve my friends above all else, so if you do not lead us into the secret retreat, I will simply save the hangman trouble in your case, and you will be one less to fight when we do ferret out your stronghold."

Wild Bill gazed fixedly into the face of his prisoner; but the young outlaw did not quiver in a single nerve at the threat and met his piercing look unflinchingly.

"You have heard my threat?"

"I have."

"And your answer?"

"I will not betray my comrades."

"There is a large reward offered for the head of Captain Tiger and each member of his band!"

"I know it."

"You can do the country a service, get a pardon for your own crimes, and receive a snug little fortune in gold, with which you can return and support the old mother you profess to love."

"Don't tempt me, sir."

"Your mother is doubtless poor, or you would not be here trying to rob for gold."

"I will not support her upon the blood-money of my comrades," was the spirited reply.

Wild Bill liked the fellow more and more; but his duty was to force from him his secret, and he again said:

"Then you prefer to kill a man and rob him, one who has never harmed you, than to take gold for betraying those, who like yourself, are a curse to civilization?"

"You are severe, but yet I will not betray those who trust in me."

"I am poor, yes, and it is by my own act that I am, for I was a wild youth, and ran through with a small fortune left me by my father, and my mother paid my debts with her portion."

"To repay her, for at last my eyes were opened to my course, I came West to dig out of the mines a fortune."

"I need not tell you that I turned over tons of earth and rocks, and got only pennies in return in gold, so growing desperate, I gambled, drank, killed a man who cheated me, and he being popular, I would have been lynched, but for the aid of two men who saved my life and took me with them out of danger."

"Those two men were Captain Tiger and Hyena Harry, and in desperation I joined their band."

"Now, sir, you know my history, and if you know my nature half as well, you would see it

was utterly useless to attempt to get me to betray those whom I call friends."

All this was said in a frank manner that carried truth with every word, and Wild Bill knew that he had one to deal with who was every inch a man.

Still he would try and break the decision of his prisoner, and turning to his Indian allies, addressed them in Sioux.

They instantly stepped forward, seized the prisoner, and in a twinkling he was securely bound to a tree.

Then, at a gesture from Red Dove, they went off and gathered fagots and brush, and all around the outlaw they were placed.

"Now, sir, you know that an Indian is said to know no mercy."

"I will give them orders to burn you to death unless you lead me to the stronghold of Captain Tiger."

The prisoner turned livid, yet not a muscle quivered or a tremor was visible to run through his frame.

He had nerve and courage that could not but win the greatest admiration of a man so blessed with those qualities as was Wild Bill.

"You heard me?"

"I did."

"And your answer?"

"I will not retract my words, sir."

"Wait until the flames begin to creep around your body."

"You will see that I will put your red allies to the blush by dying game, Wild Bill."

"Then you refuse?"

"I do."

"Enough! If you have a letter you wish to write, or any word to send, I will see that it is delivered, be it to your mother or your outlaw friends."

"Tell the latter that I died at the stake rather than betray them."

"In my letters you will find my mother's name and address, so please return them to her, saying I kept them always with me up to my death, and merely say that I was killed by Indians."

"That would be the truth, you know," he added, with a sad smile.

"I'll do as you wish."

"Mind you, not one word as to my being what I am."

"I will not betray you to your mother."

"You are a brave man, and I respect you, even though you are one of the Desperado Dozen."

"No, I am not One, but Three of the number," said the man, and he smiled at his ghastly joke, adding:

"We are all numbered, you know, Captain Tiger being No. 1; Hyena Harry, No. 2, and I come third."

"But excuse my hurrying you by asking that you set your pack on and let them worry me to death."

"I will; good-by."

"Good-by, sir, and may you meet a less terrible fate than I do."

"Good-by, my little beauty," and he waved his hand to Red Dove, who bent her head and her eyes to the ground, while even the merciless warriors felt touched at the man's remarkable gamey nature.

"Light the fire," said Wild Bill to the chief warrior, and instantly it was done, while the scout and Red Dove turned, as though to walk away and leave the poor wretch to his fate.

White, yet perfectly calm, the doomed man stood in his bonds, his face reckless and defiant, and his lion heart too indomitable to allow his lips to utter one cry of anguish.

CHAPTER XLII.

WILD BILL PLAYS A TRUMP CARD.

In obedience to the order of Wild Bill, the Sioux at once set fire to the fagots and brush around the prisoner.

But, ere the flames could kindle, Wild Bill sprang upon one side and Red Dove on the other, and instantly the burning brands were kicked aside.

The surprised prisoner uttered no word while Wild Bill, with his sharp bowie severed the thongs that bound him to the tree.

"You are free, sir."

"What, pard, have you changed your mind?" asked the outlaw.

"No; for I am not the monster to do such an act as that one I threatened you with, but pretended to intend it to force from you what I would know."

"Wild horses could not drag the secret from me."

"So I discovered, and frankly, I tell you I admire you, and wish to serve you."

"As how, for instance?"

"Where are you going now?"

"Down to the Overland trail to look for a ring I lost in the fracas the other day."

"Then you are not on duty?"

"Not now."

"Good! make me a pledge, and I will take your word, that you will not return to the stronghold in three days."

"If I decline?"

"Then you are my prisoner, and you must take the consequences."

"If I make the pledge?"

"I will set you free, and then if you want a friend, and are willing to be honest, come to me."

"But I will have to desert my comrades, and our laws are that only with one exception can a member of the Desperado Dozen leave the band without the unanimous consent of the remainder."

"And what is that exception?"

"Death."

"Ah! well, you don't care to leave the band under such terms, I take it; but I wish you to promise me not to return to the stronghold for three days."

"And then?"

"Return if you wish to."

"You have something beyond your words."

"Simply, if you do not find the band there, look me up in Poker City and I'll set you on an honest trail."

"I'll do it, for I am not as bad as my being caught in bad company would cause one to believe."

"I think so."

"Now, here are the things I took from you."

"I thank you most sincerely."

"You are welcome to your life and your effects, I assure you."

"I suppose you will not starve if left alone here?"

"Hardly, as I am a good shot and game is plenty; that is if you allow me to keep my arms?"

"Certainly, though I retain your horse."

"I cannot complain."

"Is he a good animal?"

"I think so."

"Had him long?"

"Ever since I became an outlaw."

"How long is that, may I ask?"

"Six months."

"And you are one of the attacking members of the band?"

"I do not exactly understand you."

"I mean you go to and fro from the Overland trail to the stronghold, to attack the coaches?"

"Yes."

"I did not know but that you might be one of the home-guards."

"Not I, for I like action too much, and it is the only thing that keeps me from thinking."

"Well, one question more."

"Say it."

"You all think that no one can find the trail to your stronghold?"

"We do, and with justice."

"It is indeed a difficult task, for I frankly confess I am at fault on it."

"And so will continue."

"Who discovered the retreat?"

"The Tiger, and it took him a month he says, to find his way out, and he and Hyena Harry are the only ones who dare attempt it at night, while besides those two, I alone of the band can make the trip by day without their guidance."

"And yet you just came from there?"

"Yes, I left the retreat some hours ago."

"The Tiger, as you call him, has some prisoners there?"

"I divulge no secrets, sir," said the outlaw, with a smile.

"Not intentionally, I admit," and Wild Bill smiled peculiarly, and the cause was a mystery to the young outlaw.

"Now, my friend, you can go, and remember, remain away from the stronghold until the fourth day from this."

"I will not break my pledge."

"I thank you, and good-by."

He turned and walked away, raising his hat politely to Red Dove, as he passed her, and a salute which she returned with a smile and

a bow, for she could not but admire the handsome young dare devil.

"Good-by, scalpers," he said gayly to the stolid warriors, and patting his horse affectionately, he passed on and soon disappeared from sight down the canyon.

"The White Chief smiles," said Red Dove, inquiringly, for she read in the face of Wild Bill that he was playing a part.

"Yes, I have just played my trump card."

"How?"

"That man's horse knows the way to the stronghold and I shall ride him there," was the calm response.

CHAPTER XLIII.

A DUMB TRAILER.

RED DOVE paled at the avowed intention of Wild Bill to boldly and alone enter the stronghold of the Desperado Dozen, and, as he spoke in the Sioux language, and was understood by the warriors, they expressed their admiration of his great daring by grunts of surprise and encouragement.

"The white chief is mighty, but he will have to meet many foes, and with no one near to aid him.

"Let the Red Dove and her warriors follow him," she said, trying to dissuade him from his purpose.

"No, I will just go and see how the land lies, and the Red Dove and her braves can await me at the nearest point available.

"Come, I will get ready to start at once, and the Red Dove will see that I am another man."

He went to his saddle pockets and drew out the disguise which Red Ruth had given him, and began to put it on.

The wig and beard, of long, iron gray hair, were faultless, and fitted his head and face to perfection, while a little rumpling up about the cheeks and temples, prevented any possibility of its being discovered to be a disguise.

Taking some Indian paint from a pouch, he colored his eyebrows, and then made his face a cherry brown, which gave it the look of old age, Red Dove aiding him to make his toilet with the skill of a French hair-dresser.

A rough-looking suit of buckskin, patched and fringed, was drawn over his own clothing, and his boots gave place to moccasins.

Then he put one of the Indian saddles upon the outlaw's horse, and mounted.

"Red Dove, I leave Midnight in your care, and I will expect to find you at the head of this canyon," he said as he turned and rode away, giving the intelligent animal the rein.

The Indians watched his departure with the greatest interest, and saw that the horse took the trail, as though he well knew the way.

Red Dove sighed, for she was in hopes the animal would show an uncertainty of what he was wanted to do, and that it would compel Wild Bill to return and all to make the attempt together.

But she at once set off with her warriors to find a camp off the trail, near the head of the canyon, while Wild Bill continued on to carry out his daring design.

At first the animal did not seem to relish his change of masters, and full of spirit he became restive; but he was quickly taught a lesson, and subdued, went on his way.

The animal followed the trail, Wild Bill giving him full rein, even when he took paths that were dangerous in the extreme, and seemed wholly impassable.

"I can now understand why the trail was so hard to follow, for no one would believe a man in his sober senses would take such chances.

"Well, what now?"

The horse came to a stand-still near a dense thicket of pines.

Wild Bill tried to urge him on but he would not go.

"There is something he stops here for which I cannot fathom; but I will reconnoiter," and Wild Bill dismounted and made a careful search of the trail.

But no cause of the halt could he discover.

The horse stood by patiently waiting.

Wild Bill then went to the pine thicket and drew aside the branches.

"Ah!"

As he uttered this exclamation he stooped and took out what appeared to be some bundles of rags.

There were a number there, and a closer inspection showed him their use.

"They are mufflers for the hoofs, to keep the animal from slipping.

"Old horse, you are right."

He bound four upon the hoofs of the animal, and mounting, he had not then to urge the intelligent steed on his way.

It was not long before he came to a sloping rock, going down at an angle of forty degrees, and extending over a hundred feet.

Upon either side were precipices, and in heavy rains a large mass of water must have gone in a torrent down the rock.

But now it was dry.

For a horse to attempt to have ascended or descended it with bare hoofs, would have been madness in a rider; but, with his feet securely muffled to prevent slipping, the animal slowly went down the rock in safety.

But he remained still at the bottom, and knowing that he had a motive, Wild Bill dismounted, and, looking around, found another receptacle for mufflers.

"Ah, yes, these must be taken off now," and suiting the action to the word, Wild Bill found that his dumb trailer was once more willing to press on.

Around dizzy precipices, through strange and dangerous ways, the faithful horse went on, until suddenly, just at sunset, the arch of rocks before spoken of came in view.

Beyond Wild Bill saw the tents of the bandits, and knew that he had reached the retreat of Captain Tiger.

"Eureka!" he cried, joyously. "But I passed no sentinel, and they certainly keep a man on duty, though they need not as far as the approach to their stronghold is concerned, for the way I came is barrier enough to keep back almost any one.

"Ah, I have it. We struck the trail this side of the sentinel, he being nearer the stage road, by way of which they expect their foes to come.

"Now to enter the stronghold, and Wild Bill remember you need all your nerve now, for a mistake will cost you your life, though it may thin out the Dozen some before life leaves you."

He said this grimly, and, in the gathering gloom, rode on toward the larger tent.

The dumb trailer had brought him unerringly to the goal of his hopes, and upon the man, not the brute, depended the rest.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE RETURN OF THE HYENA.

THAT Captain Tiger gloated in cruelty his men well knew.

A man with a heart that was prone to evil from his boyhood, he was also selfish and unscrupulous in gaining his own ends.

The unfortunate woman he had made his wife, he had married hoping to gain a fortune by her, and hatred for her filled his heart as soon as he knew he was thwarted in that.

His crimes drove him to the far West, and there he turned all of his wicked energies to the getting of gold.

Gambling was a pleasure to him as long as he won, but he never played but one game if luck turned against him.

He had gone to the mines, not so much to dig for gold as to plot to take from some brother miner all that he might get.

Mr. Insley had been the victim he selected, and having buried his treasure, he had thwarted the man whom he had believed his friend, but whom he had found to be his most implacable foe.

Knowing that Edna would inherit her father's gold, he tried to bind her to him as his wife, and thereby get her gold, feeling that Mr. Insley, whom he had a prisoner, would then tell the secret hiding-place of his fortune.

Failing in his plots by Edna's discovering him to be a deeply-dyed villain, and with the aid of Wild Bill saving her father and herself from the power of their cruel foe, Hugh Harcourt, under the very appropriate name, for a man of his nature, of Captain Tiger, set to work and organized a band of cutthroats known as the Desperado Dozen.

From the treasure-boxes sometimes carried by the coaches, and by robbing the passengers, Captain Tiger and his men made considerable money, or rather came in possession of it.

If one or more of their number were killed, some of the band had pards who would gladly fill their places, and thus it was, from his impregnable stronghold, Captain Tiger sallied forth to commit what deeds he wanted to, and defied punishment and capture.

At last, through opening the letters, he discovered by one mailed to Wild Bill, that Mr. Insley and Edna, believing him to be dead were coming out West to get the long-buried treasure.

He disguised himself, as the reader will remember, and when his band halted the stage he came out in his true colors, and was happy in the capture of the father and daughter, as he believed.

But instead of Edna Insley he was confronted with his wife, then on his trail, and having doomed her to die, and left her in the iron cage, and sent his two recruits, with Hyena Harry to capture Edna, he felt very well satisfied.

He was taking his siesta after his dinner several days after the departure of Hyena Harry, Captain Corduroy and Kit Carr on their devilish mission, when he was startled by a horse dashing up in a gallop.

He sprang out of the hammock and confronted Hyena Harry, his horse covered with foam and dust, and the man himself looking as though he had passed through some severe ordeal.

"Well, Harry, you back?" he asked quickly.

"It seems so."

"And alone?"

"Yes, alone, captain."

"Then you failed to get the girl?"

"No, we got her."

"And she is coming with the other two?"

He spoke eagerly, and his eyes flashed with joy.

"Not much, captain, for it was a dead failure."

"Curses! then those devils proved traitors."

"Easy, captain, and don't damn the dead."

"Dead!"

"Fact!"

"Curse you, Hyena Harry, why don't you relieve my suspense and tell me what has happened?"

"Got your flask?"

"Yes."

He took off of a limb a silver liquor flask and handed it to Hyena Harry who now dismounted, turned his horse loose with provoking coolness, and then took a long draught.

"You'll be too drunk to talk, if you drink like that."

"I need it for my nerves, captain."

"There, that is good, and now I can talk."

"Well, I am waiting."

"We went to Poker City."

"In disguise?"

"Of course. I was Count Carlos and Corduroy was Baron Bronx, and that queer border-man played our servant Pierre to perfection.

"We tackled the stage back at Breezy Point Station, and with our dogs, or rather your dogs, got on board, and arrived in safety. What we saw in Poker City you do not care to hear, but the lady got tired of staying in the hotel, and shortly after our arrival, started out for a ride, with a Heathen Chinese as an escort."

"That was your chance."

"Yes, and we took it."

"And captured her?"

"Oh yes, but don't get me ahead of my story."

"We got horses, to take a ride we said, and started on the girl's trail."

"When the Chinese caught sight of us he skipt lively, but the maiden held her ground, and all was lovely, for we became her escorts, and led her on up into the mountains in search of the heathen cavalier."

"At last she wanted to go back, and we urged, but it was no use, she started, and then we seized her."

"Bless you, she fought like a tigress—would make you a good wife, by the way; but we had it all our own way of course, until there came a crashing of the brush near by, a shot, and a horseman dashed out."

"Wild Bill! I'll wager a hundred."

"You will?"

"Yes."

"Give me your money, Cap, for it was no such thing."

"Who, in Satan's name was it?"

"A pulpit-pounder."

"What?"

"A Bible-banger."

"Quit your slang, Hyena Harry, and tell me who it was."

"I did tell you. It was a young preacher, whom you ought to remember, as he was the one who gave you the wound that so nearly

killed you, when we attacked the coach, and he also saved the treasure for the company and lost it for us."

"Do you mean it?"

"Fact, for Poker City is full of his exploits, and he is as full of fight as he is of gospel."

"The boys call him the Fighting Parson."

"And he it was, who came upon you?"

"True, and he dropped the count in his tracks, with one shot, knocked Pierre out of his saddle with another, and, as I dared not fire on him, for fear of hurting the girl, I turned tail and here I am."

"And he killed those two men and rescued the girl?"

"He did."

"One man against three."

"Yes."

"And he a preacher?"

"True."

"Hyena Harry, if I did not know you to be a brave man, I would fling the coward in your face."

"I did all I could; but I would not risk killing the girl to fire on him, feeling that we could get her another time," said Hyena Harry, who wished to tell a story to make his hasty flight seem as plausible as possible.

"You did right; but the parson rode back with the girl?"

"Yes, and I came on to the stronghold to report."

Captain Tiger shook his head and muttered:

"Things look black, Hyena Harry, and our Dozen is running down fast; but come what may, I will have Edna Insley in my power, and we must plot another scheme to accomplish it."

CHAPTER XLV.

AN UNLOOKED-FOR ARRIVAL.

THE sentinel, who was kept between the stronghold and the Overland stage-road, was riding leisurely along upon the same afternoon of the arrival of Hyena Harry in camp, when he saw a man approaching.

The guard was allowed a latitude of five miles, and more, if he thought best, to roam about, so that he did not, at any time, get far from the direct trail leading to the stronghold.

He had been down toward the stage-road and was returning, when he saw the form of a man advancing slowly toward the trail.

Instantly he reined his horse back under cover of some mountain pine trees, and covered the stranger with his rifle.

Nearer he approached, until brought to a halt by the challenge:

"Pull up, pard, an' tell us yer biz."

The man turned quickly, and raised both hands above his head, as though to show he had no hostile intent.

"Ah! you hain't dangerous, it do seem; but let yer tongue wag what yer wants, whar yer come from, whar yer is goin' an' who yer is?"

"I am one of the Dozen," was the reply.

"Shout ther words ter prove yer hain't lyin'."

"Tiger and Hyena."

"O. K., all serene; now, how is it I find I don't know yer?"

"I only joined a few days ago, with a comrade, and went off with Hyena Harry on a little secret work for the captain."

"Yas, I remembers an' recognize yer now, pard; but yer hes changed yer togs, ther barber hev been trimmin' yer, an' durned ef yer don't look sickly."

"Hes yer cotched ther measles?"

"No."

"Been badly skeert, likely, fer yer is white as a gal actress on ther stage."

"No; I have been hanged and buried alive," was the hoarse reply.

Even the hardened questioner started at the reply, and said:

"Yer don't mean it?"

"I do mean it, and you must take me at once to camp."

"Whar's yer horse?"

"Dead."

"An' yer pard?"

"Dead."

"And the Hyena Loot'nent?"

"He escaped."

"Waal, waal."

"While you ask questions, I am suffering, so I beg you to help me to camp."

"Git up behind, and we'll try ter git thar afore dark."

"Ef we don't, we'll hev ter camp on ther trail, an' thet won't be pleasant fer yer."

"But, though I kin go through by day, I hain't ther man ter tackle ther trip by night."

With some difficulty, for he was very weak yet, Dud Duncan got behind the sentinel, and the horse, unmindful of his double load, started toward camp.

By urging the animal all he dared over the dangerous road, the guard arrived at a point of the road just at dark, from whence he could find his way into camp.

It was however an hour after sunset, before he deposited Dudley Duncan at the tent of Captain Tiger.

A light was visible within, and at a table sat the chief and his lieutenant, talking over different plots to capture Edna Insley.

Suddenly there stood before them the tall form and pale face of Captain Corduroy, whom they both believed dead, and, in spite of their nerve, they sprung to their feet, a cry of horror issuing from the lips of each.

"Corduroy, from the grave, by Heaven!" cried Captain Tiger.

"The devil!" burst from Hyena Harry in hoarse tones.

"No, Hyena Harry, I am not the devil, but my own self in proper person, and, Captain Tiger, you speak truly, for I am from out the grave, and back from the very portals of death," said Dudley Duncan in low, hoarse tones.

"You look it, Corduroy, and so sure was I that you were dead, after I heard Hyena Harry's story, that I drank a bumper that Satan might rest your soul."

"Here, man, dash off this glass of brandy, and it will put life into you, and redden up your blood, for it is from the chief surgeon's stock at the fort, or rather was to have been, only I laid claim to it before it got there."

Captain Tiger poured out a glass of brandy as he spoke, and sinking into a chair, Dud Duncan dashed it off at a swallow, while not to be slighted Hyena Harry followed his example with another tumblerful, at the same time muttering:

"I wonder how his story will differ from mine?"

To his surprise, in relating his story, Dud Duncan did not differ from Hyena Harry in any of the salient points, and agreed with him that his only chance was to fly, when he saw that the parson was having it all his own way.

"But how in thunder did you get over the wound that knocked you from the horse?" asked Captain Tiger.

"It was slight, and I soon rallied out of that, with the aid of Wild Bill."

"Ha! that fiend again?"

"Yes, and he has added another debt to the hatred I owe him," hissed Duncan, and then he went on to tell of his having been hanged by the great scout.

"Hanged! Great heavens! but how did you resurrect?" asked the chief.

"A woman's curiosity, to see who was in a grave that had no headstone raised me from the dead, for she found me still warm and revived me—oh! it is fearful to think of," and he shuddered at the thought.

"I should think so."

"It is horrible," cried Captain Tiger and Hyena Harry with sympathetic shudders.

But ere he could say much more, Dudley Duncan's head reeled and he fell from the chair.

"Poor fellow, the remembrance of it has been too much for him; but a little rest and good nursing will soon bring him round."

"Reckless Charley is a good nurse, and he shall take charge of him," and Captain Tiger called to one of the band, placed Dudley Duncan under his especial charge, and then resumed his plotting with Hyena Harry, against the freedom and happiness of poor, persecuted Edna.

CHAPTER XLVI.

A STRANGER IN CAMP.

SEVERAL days passed away, after the coming back of Dudley Duncan to the outlaw stronghold, and still he kept his bed, in the tent to which Reckless Charley had taken him.

He was however only prostrated, and his nurse had dismissed him as an invalid, telling him that a few days more would give him back his former strength and health.

In the camp things remained at a standstill, for Captain Tiger had not made any move to again strike the stages, but had passed his time plotting with Hyena Harry for the future

good of the band, he said, but with himself only in his eyes.

The "Dozen," with the addition of Dudley Duncan, now numbered but *eight*, and one of them had to be on guard, and this left but six for active duty, so that Captain Tiger was most anxious to recruit his force up to the required number ere he made any decided move, and was thinking of rigging himself up in some disguise and visiting Poker City to enlist a quartette of villains who he knew would be readily found there ready to join him.

Hyena Harry distinctly refused to leave the camp again, for he said:

"You know, Tiger, I told you I would only leave the stronghold to make an attack on the coaches, and I nearly ended my life by breaking through that rule."

"It is superstition with you, Harry," said Captain Tiger.

"It may be, but I intend to humor it."

"Here I know I am safe, and in a dash down to the Overland I am always ready to go; but elsewhere I will not, for there is one on my path who is determined to kill me, and that one is the only being I fear in all the world."

"Well, I must go to Poker City and get four recruits, and I'll wager high I use them to get Edna Insley into my power."

"I don't doubt it, Tiger, for you are a bloodhound once you get on a trail."

"But do you intend to kill that poor woman in the cage?"

"No."

"The men all have orders to take her no food."

"Yes, and the one I know gives her a morsel shall die by the worst death I can concoct for him."

"Then she will die."

"Certainly, if she does not eat."

"Oh! I see; you make her starve herself to death."

"Yes."

"She is a deuced pretty woman."

"Hyena Harry, I will hear no comments upon that woman."

"She is my wife, who gravely wronged me by being poor, when she should have been rich, and she came here to kill me for fancied wrongs I had done her so long ago I really had forgotten about them."

"I placed her in that cage, and when she dies I will bury her decently, so let me hear no more about her."

"Certainly, if it is your wish; but how about the old man in the den?"

"His life depends upon his tongue, for there is a confession I wish to wring from him."

"A secret?"

"Yes."

"He won't tell?"

"No."

"Put the screws to him."

"He has the stoicism of an Indian chief, and no physical torture will open his lips."

"Then it is a dead secret?"

"No."

"How can you make a bird sing when it won't sing?"

"I'll make him divulge what I should know as soon as I get his daughter, Edna Insley, into my clutches."

"Ah, I see."

"He'll sing to save her when he'd die with sealed lips where he was concerned."

"Success to you, then, for it must be a snug little sum when you take such trouble for it."

"Who said it was money?"

"No one; only I know that is all you care for."

"You seem to know me; but I love blood-letting as well as I do gold-getting—Ha!"

Captain Tiger was upon his feet in an instant, his hand upon his revolver, the muzzle of which covered the heart of a man who had just then entered the tent and stood gazing at him.

Hyena Harry also drew his revolver, and the two men stood, as it were, at bay, for the man who had so unceremoniously come upon them was a stranger to both, and a stranger in the outlaw camp was a startling circumstance to the Desperado Dozen.

CHAPTER XLVII.

OLD NICK.

"PARDS, I hopes I sees yer."

Such was the salutation of the individual who had appeared like an apparition before Captain Tiger and Hyena Harry.

He was a man of large physique, though bent in form, as though from age, was dressed in buckskin from foot to neck, and wore a coon-skin cap, the tail hanging down his back, and the head protruding over his face, serving as a visor.

He carried a rifle, a repeater, and a pair of revolvers and a bowie, and handled them as though he used them daily.

His hair would have been white, and also his beard, had it been washed, but he seemed a stranger to soap and water, to judge from his face and hands, and general unkempt appearance.

So astounded were both the outlaws at his unlooked-for appearance, that neither spoke at his words, which were meant for a friendly salutation it seemed.

Seeing this, he again broke the silence with:

"Pards, I hopes you sees me."

"I do, and I would ask who you are?" said Captain Tiger in a suppressed tone, still keeping his revolver covering the stranger.

"Hain't yer afeerd thet weepin might go off an' I'll get hurted?"

"You certainly will if you don't tell me what you are doing here."

"Nothin'."

"Then why are you here?"

"Comed ter see yer, pard."

"To see who?"

"You, yerself and Co."

"Who am I?"

"Old Tiger Claw, I guesses."

Hyena Harry laughed, and Captain Tiger asked:

"Are you alone?"

"No."

Both men started, and the chief said:

"Who have you with you?"

"My horse."

"Who else?"

"My bull-dogs."

"Your bull-dogs?"

"Yas, my shooters; them, my knife an' my horse is my pets."

"How did you get here?"

"Comed."

"But how?"

"On horseback and foot-back, an' it are a durned dizzy road, wuss nor ther turnpike ter Jordan I hav' hearn of."

"Do you mean to say you came into this camp alone, and without a guide?"

"I does."

"Impossible!"

"It could not be done!" cried both Captain Tiger and Hyena Harry.

"You is a couple o' howlin' liars, for it were did."

They both laughed, in spite of their anxiety, at the presence of the stranger, and Captain Tiger said:

"If you have done that, you have accomplished that which no other man could do."

"Thet's my style, pards."

"And you came just now?"

"I did."

"Have you seen any one else in this camp?"

"Nary."

"And you came to see me?"

"If you is ther Tiger Cap'n, you is my man."

"I am Captain Tiger."

"Waal, yer look it. And who are thet?"

"My name is Hyena Harry."

"Yer looks it too. I guesses I hes got into a cirkis, or a den o' animiles, an' I does hopes yer'll be as good to me as were ther lions to Daniell, an' not chaw me up."

The two outlaws seemed to enjoy their strange visitor immensely; but it worried them greatly to think that one man had been able to come unaided, and a part of the way under darkness, to their retreat, and Captain Tiger again asked:

"And you mean that you came here without a guide?"

"Pard, breath hain't cheap enough ter spend it all in lyin' an' I hes told yer what I dono."

"And what did you want to see me for?"

"Ter jine ther band."

"Join the Desperado Dozen?"

"Yas."

"A man of your years ought to be able to live in peace among his fellow-men, and not have to hide in the mountains."

"Fact, but yet I hain't, 'case I hev did things thet folks don't like, an' they do tell me mon in these heur parts w'd hang me jist as quick as they w'd you, so you see, I don't look well hangin', an' I comed here ter keep from it."

"Where do you hail from?"

"Calamity City."

"And your name?"

"The boys call me Old Nick."

"You look it."

"I guess I does."

"Well, I'll enlist you to-morrow, after you have led me back by the trail you came, that I may see if you tell the truth, or that I have a traitor in camp."

"For the night you must be content to be a prisoner."

"Pard, let me tell yer one thing, an' it are a piece o' advice yer ought ter remember."

"Well, what is it?"

"How many men hes yer?"

"We are called the Desperado Dozen."

"Fact then yer has a dozen traitors in camp, an' perhaps as many more."

"How do you make that out, you hoary old sinner?"

"Do you walk or ride?"

"Ride of course."

"Then your horses are the traitors, for I got hold of a horse that knew the trail as well, if not better than you do, and he brought me here."

"By Heaven! I never thought of that before!" cried Captain Tiger, while Hyena Harry said:

"Now, old Graybeard, I know you have lied, for there is one spot on the trail no horse could come over unaided."

"You think so? Waal, yer is right, an' when mine stopped at ther rock slide it tuk me a long time to diskiver ther cause; but at last I seen ther muffles in ther pine thicket, an' put 'em on, an' so yer see I are heur."

Captain Tiger and Hyena Harry walked apart for a few minutes and conversed in a low tone, and then the former said:

"Well, Old Nick, we want a few more men, and you can join the band, for I believe you are a good one."

"As you give such a good account of yourself I will not put you under guard to-night, as I had intended; so go with my lieutenant here, and he will introduce you to the boys."

Old Nick thanked the chief and silently followed Hyena Harry from the tent.

The men, who were gambling in their quarters, received him with looks of amazement; but when Hyena Harry explained that he had come to be one of them, and how he had gotten to the camp, they seemed satisfied, and invited him to take a hand in their game.

He had just set down to do so, and Hyena Harry had turned to go, when Captain Corduroy appeared in the doorway and started at the sight of the stranger.

Instantly he stepped back and began to talk with Hyena Harry in a low tone, yet very earnestly.

The result was that two of the outlaws were beckoned out, and five minutes afterward Captain Corduroy entered, and walking around faced the stranger.

Then Captain Tiger, Hyena Harry and the two outlaws who had been called out of the cabin stepped quickly in and took a stand behind Old Nick, each one with a revolver leveled at him.

Wholly unconscious of what was going on, he took up his cards and looked them over with considerable interest.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

TURNING THE TABLES.

"WHAT do you do, pard Graybeard?" asked one of the outlaws, looking over his cards, and referring to Old Nick.

"I pass," was the reply.

"No, you do not!"

Old Nick looked up quickly at the voice, and full of nerve as he was, he seemed to start as his eyes fell upon the one who had spoken.

But instantly regaining his cool manner, he asked:

"Did yer chip in ter me jist now, pard?"

"I did," said Captain Corduroy, and he fixed his gaze upon the stranger.

"Praps yer wishes ter take my han' an' play ther game?"

"No; but if you move I'll have your life."

With his words Dudley Duncan throw forward his hand, and in it was a revolver which covered the heart of the stranger.

But, quick as was his act, the old stranger was quicker, as he had to draw his weapon, and each man covered the other at the same instant.

"Waal, pard, pull ef yer hes a mind ter," said Old Nick, in his quiet way.

"No, I do not wish to shoot you."

"What then hes yer ag'in' me?"

"Pards, you have him covered!" and in answer to Dudley Duncan's question, addressed to those behind the stranger, and without taking his eyes off of him, there came the response in Captain Tiger's deep tones:

"We have, and if he moves our bullets riddle him."

"Hev I got inter a trap, whar I thought I were among friends?" said Old Nick, though he did not move a muscle other than his lips.

"You have had the tables turned upon you by one you deemed dead, that is all."

"Who are that?"

"Do you not know me?"

"Pears ter me I hes seen yer photo afore, but then yer hes sich a common run o' face, I mostly fergits."

"Has we met?"

"We have."

"Yer looks a leetle mite sickly; be yer afflicted with mountain ager?"

"Captain Tiger, this man knows well who I am, for I saw his start at seeing one he thought he had killed," cried Dudley Duncan.

"Well, Corduroy, who in thunder is he, for I am getting tired of this nonsense," said Captain Tiger, impatiently.

"I asked you to aid me in the capture of a man you would give much to have your gripe on, and I now keep my word by telling you that this is no old man, but Wild Bill Hikok in disguise."

The name of Wild Bill burst from every man's mouth with utter amazement and considerable consternation, but the accused never moved, other than to fold his arms upon his broad breast, and raise his form from its bent posture.

"Are you Wild Bill?"

The question came from Captain Tiger in suppressed tones of joy.

"I am."

A wild shout burst from the outlaws at this reply.

But Wild Bill simply removed his false beard and wig, and down upon his shoulders fell his long hair, and his piercing eyes seemed to read the face of every man present.

"It is useless to tell you that you are a prisoner?"

"I would judge so, Captain Tiger," was the calm reply.

"Disarm him, Hyena Harry."

The outlaw officer stepped forward and obeyed.

"Now clap the irons upon him."

This order was also obeyed.

"His feet too, for he is an ugly customer."

"Now, Tiger, what is to be done with him?" said Hyena Harry, when he had completed the pleasant duty of ironing hand and foot the man whom all present so greatly feared.

"Drag him to the den and throw him in."

"With old Insley?"

"Yes."

Silent, defiant, Wild Bill dragged himself along after Hyena Harry and two outlaws, for the chains upon him were very heavy.

After a painful walk for the prisoner, they arrived at the den, and were greeted with a most savage howl from the grizzly bear that acted as the guard.

"Ho, old man, I have brought you company," called out Hyena Harry, unfeeling to the prisoner back in the gloom of the cavern.

But he returned no reply, and Hyena Harry again called out:

"He is an old friend, I believe, Insley, and next you will have your daughter to cheer your solitude."

"Liar, my angel daughter is beyond your reach, for she is in heaven, where devils never enter."

"Ha! ha! ha! I killed her last night, to escape the touch of that monster."

"Better was it for her to die by my hand than live in misery."

"Ha! ha! ha! go and tell your Tiger Captain that he is thwarted at last, and by Boyd Insley."

The voice sounded wild and strange, and Wild Bill cried in suppressed tones:

"Good God! he is mad."

"By Heaven, but I believe you are right, and if so, the captain has overshot the mark this time," and Hyena Harry called out again, and in tones of kindness.

"Tell me, Mr. Insley, will you not have a friend to keep you company?"

"Hush! she lies here dead, and even in death your voice makes her shudder," came in a hoarse whisper.

"Try and soothe him, Wild Bill, for the captain would not have him mad for a great deal."

"I am your prisoner, sir, but not under your orders please understand."

"Is that my prison?" and Wild Bill motioned toward the den.

"It is, and that sentinel you will find cannot be passed, so even the famous Wild Bill will be safe in there."

"Come, pass in, while I keep this brute off of you."

"Down, Terror, down, sir!"

The grizzly growled, but obeyed, and Wild Bill passed on into the darkness.

"The place is so loathsome you'll excuse me if I do not go further; but make yourself at home, Bill, and if you need anything ask old Insley for it, and he will supply you, for he is provided with every luxury, as you will discover."

"Good-by, Bill," and with a mocking laugh, which his two comrades echoed, Hyena Harry turned away from the den, leaving Wild Bill a prisoner with the man he had risked so much to save.

CHAPTER XLIX.

SEALED LIPS.

WHEN Wild Bill passed the savage grizzly, he did not shrink at the fierce growl, for he had met monsters as terrible before, and subdued them in a hand-to-hand combat.

Besides, he had met men who were more merciless than brutes.

Going back into the cavern he felt his way, and his hand soon touched the head of a human being.

Instantly the hand was seized with fearful force, and it was only after a desperate struggle that he released himself from the grasp of the madman, and prevented him from burying his teeth in his flesh.

"My poor, poor friend, it cuts me to the heart to see you thus," said Wild Bill, when he had retreated out of reach of the madman, for he had noticed in his struggle with him that he was chained to the rocky wall.

"Who calls Boyd Insley friend?" growled the panting wretch.

"I do, for you are my friend."

"Your voice strikes a chord of memory in my heart, and comes back to me from the far-away past like some old tune."

"Who are you?"

"Hikok."

"Hikok? I know a hotel by that name, sir; are you any relation to it?"

"Yes, for it was named after me," answered Wild Bill, humoring the madman.

"There you lie, sir, be you whom you may, for it was named after my friend, Wild Bill."

"And I am Wild Bill Hikok, Mr. Insley."

"Come nearer and let me see if you are."

"It is too dark for you to see in here."

"Then I can feel, and I know Wild Bill so well my touch can recognize him."

"Come near me, I say."

Wild Bill advanced, but thoroughly on his guard, and well for him was it that he was, for instantly the madman grappled with him again and another fierce struggle followed, the poor wretch shrieking wildly all the time.

Again Wild Bill released himself, and with difficulty, hampered as he was with his irons, and muttered:

"He is as mad as a dog, and I must be careful."

Again he sought to soothe the unfortunate prisoner with kind words, but all to no avail, for ever and anon he would burst out with the wildest ravings.

"Well, I must give it up and get some rest, for I need all my energies now to save myself," said Wild Bill, and, in spite of his seemingly desperate situation, he by no means gave up hope of escape.

At last the dull glimmer of breaking day stole into the loathsome cavern, and, wearied out with his ravings Mr. Insley sunk down upon the rock floor to sleep.

Wild Bill then had an opportunity to gaze around him.

His prison he took in at a glance, with all its strength, discomforts and uncleanness.

Then he gazed upon the poor man who had won him by his dignity and kindly manner.

Now he was but half clad, chained around the neck like a dog, his hair and beard were unkempt, and his face was emaciated and full of suffering.

He groaned in his sleep several times, and once the name of his daughter was upon his lips.

His body, bare to the waist, was bleeding here and there, and a more thorough picture of misery Wild Bill felt that he had never looked upon, and in the wreck, which a few days had made, he could hardly trace a resemblance to the man he had known.

"By Heaven! but that man shall pay for this, if ever I escape, and escape I will," he said in hoarse tones, forgetting himself in the sorrows of Mr. Insley.

From the madman he turned to the brute and contemplated the savage monster critically.

"If they think I cannot master you in some way, they do not know me."

"If I were free of these irons, savage old devil that you are, you could not keep me in this cavern," he said, and the grizzly, as though he understood that he was not being complimented growled and showed his teeth, while he fixed his glaring eyes upon Wild Bill with a look that plainly indicated a desire to break his fast upon him.

From the bear Wild Bill's thoughts turned to Reckless Charley, and he smiled as he said:

"I guess he'll return to find that not only are the outlaws still here, but that they have me in durance vile; but I certainly expected that I would be able, with the aid of Red Dove and her braves, to break up this camp and bring just punishment upon the Tiger and his cubs."

"Had it not been for Dudley Duncan I would have done so."

"But how in the name of goodness did he survive that hanging?"

"And it is an equal mystery how he recognized me in that disguise."

"I was half tempted to risk a fight with all; but concluded the chances would be better to surrender, and things don't look half so bad as they did, for Red Dove and her braves are yet alive, and they are already preparing to find out why I did not return."

"I wonder where the veiled lady is, whom the Tiger had captive?"

"Well, I must find out all I can, and when I can act, act promptly."

Just then Mr. Insley awoke with a start and a cry, and fixed his gaze upon Wild Bill.

"Who are you?" he asked with a seeming return to reason, evidently forgetting the events of the past night, and his struggle with his fellow-prisoner.

"Don't you know me, Mr. Insley?"

"No."

"I am Wild Bill, and I came here to save you."

"No, you came here to drag from me the secret of where I hid my gold; but you cannot, you shall not, for it was for her, my beautiful child, my Edna."

"As she is buried, so it is buried, and none can find it."

"No, no. You can go to the umbrella rock and walk one hundred paces due east, and then one hundred due south, and yet you can not find it— Oh! oh! oh! take the burning iron from out my heart, for it drives me mad with anguish."

He half sprang up, as far as his chain would admit of, and Wild Bill tried to catch him as he was falling.

But he fell heavily, and lay like one stunned. Placing his hand upon his heart, Wild Bill knew that its pulsation had forever ceased, and said sadly:

"He is dead, and a bitter, bitter blow will this be to his poor daughter."

CHAPTER L.

THE TIGER SHOWS HIS CLAWS.

POOR Mr. Insley had not grown cold before a quick footstep was heard, and Wild Bill saw the form of Captain Tiger standing in the cavern entrance.

The grizzly bear seemed to know him, as he did Hyena Harry, and whined with delight at the coming of his master.

"Well, sir, how did you pass the night?" asked the outlaw chief, gazing into the further end of the den until his eyes became accustomed to the darkness.

"I have passed many a worse night," was Wild Bill's reply in an indifferent tone.

"And my dear Insley, I hope all goes well with you."

No answer coming, Captain Tiger continued: "Hyena Harry told me you were playing mad last night."

Still no response, and the outlaw said, impatiently:

"If he is asleep shake him up."

"He is asleep, Captain Tiger."

"Wearied by his playing the madman last night, doubtless."

"But, Insley, it will do you no good, for I have hit upon a plan to get your daughter here, and then I will unseal your lips of the secret they hold."

"Captain Tiger you are talking to a dead man," came in Wild Bill's deep tones.

"What is that you say, Hikok?" asked the villain, anxiously.

"Mr. Insley, your victim, is dead."

"Dead!"

"Yes, he died an hour ago."

"Curse you, villain, you killed him, if he is dead," yelled the infuriated outlaw.

"I killed him?"

"Yes."

"In God's name why should I kill the poor man?"

"You got him to tell you the secret of where his treasure was buried, and then you killed him, fearing he might go mad and make it known to me."

"Hugh Harcourt, for I know you in spite of your disguise, I owe you a debt I hope some day to pay, and when I do you shall be made to remember those words," and Wild Bill's voice fairly quivered with passion, so deeply as he moved at the accusation of the outlaw chief.

"Bah! you daring to threaten when I have you wholly in my power."

"I have been a prisoner before, Hugh Harcourt."

"Ay, and you shall remain one now until you give to me the secret that man told you."

"Dead! by Heaven, I believe you lie."

He sprang into the cave and was stooping to place his hand over the heart of the dead man, when some instinct, or presentiment, caused him to spring backward with the quickness of a flash.

He was just in time to escape being caught in the iron gripe of Wild Bill.

"Ha! you dared make an attempt upon my life," he shouted in fury, and trembling with rage and terror at his narrow escape.

"Ay, had I gotten my gripe on your throat, Hugh Harcourt, the earth would have been freed of its greatest villain."

"I could shoot you down, Wild Bill, as you stand."

"But you will not."

"Do you dare me?"

"Certainly, for I know you, and as long as you believe I hold the secret you killed that old man to try and force from him, no power could make you harm me."

"Don't you be too certain."

"I know you, Hugh Harcourt; but come, have this body taken out and given decent burial, that you may be able to tell the daughter how you honored her father."

"A good suggestion, Hikok, and one I will follow; shove the body out."

"It is chained."

"Cut his head off and that will free him of his chains."

"You forget I have no knife."

"True; but here is the key of his lock, so unchain him and push him where I will get him, and I will give him decent burial for his sweet daughter's sake and the fortune he has left her, and which I will get."

He tossed Wild Bill the key of the padlock, and unfastening the chain from around the neck of Mr. Insley, Wild Bill pushed the body toward the chief, who dragged it further away.

"Now, Tiger, you see how little I care for your chains—see!"

As he spoke he deliberately fastened the chain around his own neck, locked it, and tossed the key toward the outlaw chief.

Captain Tiger was astounded at this seeming act of bravado and defiance, and, with a muttered oath, kicked the body out of the cavern and disappeared from sight, leaving Wild Bill alone to his thoughts.

But the scout was no man to grow moody in trouble and despair, and he at once began to devise some method of escape.

All day long no one came near him, and at dark a man brought food for himself and the

grizzly, and there was little choice between the two suppers.

Another day came, and not a soul did he see until the same outlaw came with food and water.

"Fer my animiles," as he expressed it.

"Where is your chief?" asked Wild Bill.

"Gone off somewhere."

"And Hyena Harry?"

"Oh, he's here."

"When do you expect Captain Tiger back?"

"Nobody knows adzactly, and the boys do say he hev gone ter git him a wife."

"A wife?"

"Yes; ther darter o' ther old man yer kilt in heur t'other night."

"Wa'n't yer ashame' ter kill thet sickly old man?"

"Why, ther grizzly wudn't hev did thet," and the villain assumed a look of holy horror, which caused Wild Bill to say:

"If I had hold of you I'd make you think the grizzly had you."

"Yer look it; but it hain't my bizziness ter git in yer grip."

"I'll be heur ter-morrer with another nice feed, an' I hope yer'll be in a better humor."

With this the man left, and the weary hours of darkness dragged their slow length along for the poor prisoner until another day came and passed.

Then Wild Bill began to feel somewhat anxious, for if Red Dove had intended acting to save him he knew she would have done so more promptly, unless something had befallen her, and the absence from camp of Tiger made him feel desperately uneasy.

But, bound hand, foot and neck, he could only wait, and if help came not to him take the consequences, whatever they might be.

CHAPTER LI.

THE PARSON'S STORY.

As my story is forced into a very short period of time, kind reader; it necessitates my going from character to character, and pen-painting the incidents and adventures that befell them, and now I return to Poker City and those there in whom I hope I have created an interest in these pages.

Harvey Haviland was one of those "workers in the vineyard" that never allowed the grass to grow under his feet in carrying out everything he had undertaken, and consequently he had Poker City "by the ears," so to speak, in a very short time.

His first sermon in that very wicked community was a surprise and a delight to all who heard it.

Edna had gone to hear him, and she, too, found consolation, sympathy and hope in listening to the young clergyman.

If timid in manner when alone with her, in the pulpit—a dry goods box so called—he was an orator and eloquent in the extreme.

The constitutional church sleepers got no chance to take a nap that day, and he made every hearer feel that he was talking directly to him or her.

In advising his hearers to not give themselves up to drink, he waxed so eloquent in portraying the misery of a drunkard that a miner said audibly:

"I guess ther parson knows how 'tis hisself."

The remark reached the ears of the preacher, and his face turned crimson, and then white as snow, and in thundering tones he cried:

"Ay, you have spoken the truth, a true word in jest, my friend, for I do know how it is myself."

"Once I had a happy home, loving parents, and a sister who was my idol."

"I was sent to college and there I became dissipated, and rapidly went from bad to worst, until all hope of redeeming me was given up in the hearts of those who loved me."

"My beautiful sister married my best, my truest friend, and when, one day, he remonstrated with me for my conduct, maddened by wine, I struck him."

"He was not the man to take a blow, and he challenged me."

"Still wild with liquor, I accepted, instead of throwing myself at his feet and begging him to forgive and forget."

"We met on the dueling field, and there he felt he could not fire upon me, so discharged his weapon in the air."

"But not so with me, for I had no mercy in my wine-maddened brain, and I fired directly at him and he fell mortally wounded."

"He lived just five minutes, and in that

time I became a sober man, and heard him forgive his murderer."

"I lay ill of brain fever for weeks, and then went to Texas to get away from myself and haunting memories."

"I became a deadly shot, a perfect rider, and the champion in all sports, and yet I was wretched even in my triumphs."

"I longed to drown memory in the wine-cup, but yet had the strength to shun it, and at length I was called home to see my sister die of a broken heart."

"And in dying she too forgave me for killing her husband, and said to me:

"Brother, the world is large, and you can do much good in it."

"Go where this shadow does not hang over you, and teach others who are sinning the way to repentance."

"I obeyed that dying wish, studied for the ministry, became a clergyman, and I have come here to lead you, my friends, out of the slough of sin in which you are mired."

"Unfortunately for me, and fortunately for others, I have had to again take human life; but it was not as that one sin of my life, and it does not rest as an iron weight upon my soul."

"I meant not to tell you, my friends, that your teacher of a correct life was Cain—accursed, but hearing that remark, I have confessed to you how truly do I know how all wickedness is myself, and I beg you to find peace as I have done."

A few more words, and when Harvey Haviland stepped out of the pulpit—drygoods box—his sermon ended, a shout from that wild congregation made the shingles rattle, and he was seized on the shoulders of his admirers and borne back to the hotel, where he was voted "a brick," and enrolled two-score names of repentant sinners, who, in the language of one of their number:

"Were willin' an' ready ter kick ther stuffin' out of sin an' sw'ar ter live subdooed, so as ter be able ter climb ther golden stairs an' dig ther dust o' richeousness in ther Happy Huntin' Grounds, as them d—d cussed onery Injuns calls ther place o' Heavenly Rest."

CHAPTER LII.

THE WOMAN IN BLACK.

The day after the parson's sermon Andy Rush drove up with his stage, and calling out to Dan Dale, said:

"Gov'ner, ther Desperado Dozen hev made it so lively on ther road o' late I has but one pilgrim inside ther hearse, an' she are a 'ooman."

"Did you see the Agents this run in, Andy?" asked Dan Dale, as he stepped to the door, hat in hand, to welcome the lady guest.

"Not a hoof or hair."

Then he turned to the passenger inside the stage and continued:

"Ther old hearse hev arriv', ma'am, at ther Hikok Hash Mill, an' yer is in Poker City."

Dan Dale then opened the door and a woman in black, and deeply veiled, got out.

"Distill'd sweetness long drawn out."

"She'd make two ord'nary sawed-off gals."

"She'll run ter seed ef they lets her grow."

"Guess her folks is all in ther bone-yard."

"Yas, she do be in black; wonder ef her face are ther same?"

Such were the running comments of the crowd, at the appearance of the passenger, who was remarkably tall for a woman, and clad in rich deep mourning, she did give the idea that she had no relatives living.

"Guess she's arter some husband as hes forgot ter go hum ter his fambly; but she'll hev growed so sin' he see her, he'll not know her."

"Dan'll hev ter git her a telescope bed ter draw out."

"He can't fill her on hash three meals daily, an' a night-mare supper afore retirin', and make a cent on ord'nary prices."

And so on went the remarks, the crowd seeming deeply interested in the tall stranger, who was at once dubbed:

"The Woman in Black."

Just then Andy Rush came in, nodding right and left, and heading through the crowd, like a Mississippi steamer among snags, for the bar, where Carrots presided, as red headed as ever.

"Whar'd yer cotch her, Andy?" asked one.

"Ef she'd hev clum a tree an' pulled it up arter her, ye'd hev never caught her, Andy."

"Who are she?"

"Whar are she from?"

"Does she be a wedded woman?"

"Hes she got any children, or is they all deceased?"

"W'u'd she like yer marry?"

Nearly wild at the shower of questions, Andy cried:

"Boys, I'll tell yer all I knows about ther lady."

"She comed from Sandy Station, an' are lookin' fer some kin she hoped ter find heer."

"She hev ther dust, an' pays fer what she gits."

"Are she good-lookin'?" asked one.

"Waal, she hev a face thet hain't homespun beauty, an' it do hev a look as though ef she war married she'd war ther britches."

"Yas; I got a squint of her, an' durned ef I hadn't ruther hev her my widdier then my wife," said one of the crowd.

"What are her name?" another asked.

"Mrs. Long."

"Ther name are korrek, she are long fer this world," and Andy having invited all to drink, a rush was made for the bar.

But just then the parson came along, and a score of voices were heard shouting:

"Water fer me, Carrots, ef I drown."

"Lemonade fer me, Carrots."

"Water, pard, with ther chill tuk off."

"Cider, Carrots, o' ther hard kind."

"Yas, cider fer me too, on'y a leetle more harder than Toby's."

These calls of the repentant for drinks, showed plainly that the Fighting Parson was carrying the good work bravely on.

CHAPTER LIII.

KIDNAPPED.

THE "Woman in Black" seemed to be in no way bashful about making herself at home in the hotel, for she told Governor Dan that she wanted the best and could pay for it.

She wished her meals served in her rooms, too, and if there were any ladies in the hotel she would be glad to meet them, as she was very lonesome.

She talked business in a way that showed she knew what she talked about, and said she had met with a sad bereavement in the death of her husband, whom she had not seen for years, and who had died in Poker City some months ago.

Dan asked his name and remembered a rich miner of that name who had died suddenly—been shot—and it was said he had a wife who would come on and claim his property.

As an opportunity offered, when Edna Insley was passing through the hall, Dan introduced the two ladies to each other.

Edna saw a woman of thirty-five, perhaps, with a face that was strongly marked, and did not take to her.

But Mrs. Long seemed to go into ecstasies over Edna's beauty, and seemed so kind to her, and talked of her loneliness in the world, that the maiden could not but treat her politely.

The third day after the coming of the Woman in Black to the Hikok Hotel, she begged Edna to take a drive with her.

The maiden, still anxious and sorrowing regarding the fate of her father, for no word had come to her from Wild Bill, did not care to go; but warmly urged, she consented, and a vehicle, the only attempt at a carriage in Poker City, was ordered to the door.

It was a rickety old concern, half ambulance, half cart, and as it rattled down the street, driven by its owner, it received many comments from the lookers on.

"What's its breed, Spikes?"

"Are it a cirkis van?"

"Ther town hearse are more comfortable fer a ride, ladies."

"It are lame in thet off hind wheel."

"Don't stop suddint, Spikes, or it will hurt ther horses."

"It are a churn on wheels."

These comments, many of them, reached the ears of Spikes the owner and driver, and also were heard by Edna and Mrs. Long in spite of the rattling, and the two ladies laughed at them.

"Which way, leddies?" asked Spikes, drawing up at the forks of the street, where terminated Poker City proper.

"Do you think your carriage will stand the mountain road?" asked Mrs. Long.

"Yas'm, it can't be hurted," was Spikes's frank remark, though it was not intended as a slight on his vehicle.

"I should think not," murmured Edna.

Go up the mountain road the crazy vehicl

rattled, at a pace that threatened to demolish it, for Spikes certainly had a good team of horses, and even a slow pair would have hastened, to escape a crash upon their heels.

At length Mrs. Long begged Spikes to draw rein, that they might admire the grand view of mountain and valley, and hardly had the horses come to a halt, when a shot rung out on the still air, and, with a wild shriek the poor driver fell from his seat a dead man.

At the same instant two men sprung out from the bushes near by and seized the bits of the frightened horses, while one shouted:

"All serene, cap'n."

"Yes, all is well, for here is my game."

"Miss Insley, you are my prisoner."

It was the Woman in Black who spoke, and her hands held Edna in a grasp she could not shake off.

Then the maiden realized that the hoarse voice of the supposed woman, now no longer disguised, took on the deep tones of a man, and she almost fainted with despair, and asked faintly:

"Who are you?"

"Look me well in the face."

"Hugh Harcourt!"

With the utterance of that hated name Edna's brain grew dizzy, and she sunk down in the vehicle unconscious.

CHAPTER LIV.

RECKLESS CHARLEY.

THE few of the outlaws remaining in the stronghold, after the departure of Captain Tiger on his kidnapping expedition, were really worried at the absence of one of their number.

He had gone out several days before for a ride, and had not returned, though his horse had been seen roaming in the pasture.

What had become of him no one knew, and only surmised.

He was known to be a daring fellow, and it was feared that he had been killed.

Not another man in the Desperado Dozen would have excited such interest as this missing one, and the reason was that he was the most popular one of the band.

He always had a kind word for all, was a dashing, generous-hearted fellow, and if any of the men were ill, he was the first to come to their side to nurse them.

That man was Reckless Charley, whose absence the reader, if not the outlaws, can readily account for.

But on the third day following his absence, to the delight of all, Reckless Charley came walking into camp.

His appearance was greeted with a shout, and the question in chorus:

"Where have you been, Charley?"

"A prisoner," was the laconic reply.

"Does yer mean it?"

"Yes."

"Who had yer?"

"Indians."

"No."

"It is the truth."

"Good 'twasn't Vigilantes."

"Yes, I prefer Indians to Vigilantes every time."

"How did you git away?"

"Much easier than I thought; but what is the news?"

"Nothin' wuth pickin' up."

"Where is the captain?"

"Off on a trip."

"And Hyena Harry?"

"He are heur."

"Well, I am glad all goes well."

"Yes, it goes better than waal, fer we has a priz'ner."

"You?"

"Yes, we picked up a boss prize."

"From the coaches?"

"Nary. He comed to us."

"Who is it?"

"Guess."

"I cannot."

"Waal, it are Wild Bill."

Reckless Charley started, and cried:

"Have you really that man in your power?"

"We has."

"And he is here now?"

"Yes, in the den."

"How did you capture him?"

"Oh, slick as fallin' off a log."

"But how?"

"Jist took him in out o' ther damp."

"Whose chips did he call in?"

"Nary body's, fer he didn't show fight, as he seen it was suddint death."

"He comed heur one night, sayin' he were Old Nick, an' Lordy, Charley, how he were disguised."

"An' he played it well; but yer know ther new man?"

"Which one?"

"Corduoy."

"Yes, what of him?"

"Well, he seen cl'ar thro' ther disguise, an' we jist lifted Wild Bill, an' when ther cap'n comes back then ther cirkis will begin."

"What will the captain do with him?"

"They do say he will be sot on fire, an' I guess it will be warm for him!"

Reckless Charley having heard "the news" of the camp, passed on to his quarters, and on the way discovered his own horse quietly feeding.

"Ah! now I know Wild Bill's little game."

"He made my horse bring him here, and he has been good enough to turn him loose, and not betray how he got him."

Having reported to Hyena Harry that the Sioux had had him for several days, the lieutenant told him he need not go on guard, in his turn, as he looked as though he needed rest.

Thanking him for his kindness, Reckless Charley strolled in the direction of the den.

Wild Bill recognized him before he came to the mouth of the cavern, and called out:

"Well, sir, you kept your pledge?"

"I did, and I am sorry to see you here."

"Not more sorry than I am to be here."

"Well, you did me a good turn in not hanging me, or burning me that day, and I'll return it by setting you free."

"Do you mean it?"

"I do."

"You are not the caliber for an outlaw."

"I am sorry to say that it looks as though I am."

"But are you heavily ironed?"

"I was."

"And are not now?"

"No, for I freed myself, and intended to take French leave to-night."

"But you could never pass this brute."

"Oh, yes, for old grizzly and myself have made friends."

"See here."

As he spoke, Wild Bill walked boldly up to the savage beast and laid his hand upon his head.

The brute seemed to instinctively recognize the master spirit, and laid down at his feet.

Then Wild Bill walked out a free man.

"Now go up yonder canyon, and remain until dark, and then I will come and guide you out of this place, and hope never to see you here again."

"Thank you, I will wait for you," and a peculiar smile crossed Wild Bill's face which Reckless Charley could not fathom.

Following the directions of the young outlaw, Wild Bill found a safe shelter, while Reckless Charley returned to the camp, happy over his noble act in releasing the man who had been his friend.

CHAPTER LV.

CAUGHT IN A SNARE.

TRUE to his word, shortly after it was dark, Reckless Charley set out down the canyon for the prison den.

Passing it by, with a word to the grizzly guard, who was sentinel over empty quarters, he went to the pine thicket on the mountain side, where he had told Wild Bill he could find a safe retreat.

The valley, in which was the stronghold, was surrounded on all sides by mountains, to scale which was impossible, and ingress and egress was only through the arched way before spoken of.

Upon arriving at the pine thicket, Reckless Charley gave a low whistle, and it was almost instantly answered by a like signal.

A moment after Wild Bill confronted him.

"Well, my friend, my horse, the same you rode here, is just out the arch awaiting you, and he will take you safely away from this devilish place, unless you should meet the captain returning, or run upon the outer sentinel, and then you can protect yourself, for it will be man to man."

"Here are your arms, which I took from where Hyena Harry had put them, and now I bid you good luck and good-by."

"My dear fellow, I thank you sincerely for your kindness to me, but have a secret to tell you, if you will listen."

"Of course I will, though I advise you to lose no time."

"Oh, I have plenty of time for the work before me, and first I will tell you frankly that you are my prisoner."

Wild Bill covered his head with his revolver as he spoke, one of the weapons just handed to him by the young outlaw.

"Great God! can you do such a thing as this?" cried Reckless Charley, evidently cut to the heart.

"Yes, for I am acting for your good."

"My good?"

"Yes, let me explain."

"You believed that you set me free this evening, but you did not, as my irons had been filed off an hour before you came."

"Ah! a traitor in the camp."

"No! but Red Dove, the young Indian girl whom you saw with me, ferreted out the secret trail, searched this valley last night and found me in that loathsome cavern."

"With game her warriors brought with them, she fed the grizzly and he became her friend and she passed into the cavern and freed me of my irons, and to-night I was to act."

"Act!"

"Yes, that is, take possession of this outlaw camp."

"Now I don't want you killed, so make you my prisoner, and when the camp is mine, then you are free."

"Thank Heaven you are not what you momentarily made me believe you."

"No; I am not given to mean actions, even with my foes."

"Now, my friend, I will not ask you one word regarding your camp and the number of outlaws there, but will secure you here until our return."

"If we are defeated, you will be found bound, and not be compromised in the eyes of your comrades."

"Red Dove!"

The maiden glided out of the shadow of the pines and nodded pleasantly to the young outlaw.

"Let Red Rain bind our friend here."

The maiden called the warrior referred to, and Reckless Charley found himself securely bound and tied to a tree in almost a moment's time.

"Come!"

Wild Bill spoke in his low, deep tones, and Red Dove sprung to his side, and behind them came the warriors.

As silent as specters they glided up to the camp.

The cabin of the men had a light in it, and voices were heard there, while the tent of Hyena Harry was also lighted up.

"Let Red Rain take those men with his braves."

"Alive if he can, but kill if he must."

"Red Dove, you come with me," and Wild Bill walked toward the tent of Hyena Harry.

Arriving there, he saw the outlaw officer seated at the table chatting with Dudley Duncan, who had regained his former health.

"You level on the Hyena, Dove, and I'll cover that man," whispered Wild Bill, and then in trumpet tones, which reached the Indians and served as a signal to them, he cried:

"Surrender or die!"

The two men sprung to their feet, and Dudley Duncan drew a revolver just as Wild Bill confronted him.

There were two shots, almost together, but Wild Bill's arm was deadly, while Dudley Duncan missed.

"At last, at last, and I am cheated of my revenge!" groaned the man, as he lay on the ground, with a foot of Wild Bill upon either arm.

"Yes, you are cheated of your revenge, and I get mine, Dudley Duncan."

"You do not swing for your crimes, but this time there shall be no mistake."

"With my last breath I curse you, Wild Bill."

"Your curse will serve as a blessing to me. Ah! he is dead!"

The last throb had run through his frame, and at last death had come in earnest for its victim.

Turning, Wild Bill saw that Hyena Harry lay beneath the table, while Red Dove said apologetically:

"I was forced to kill him, too."

"It is a pity the wretch cheated the gallows; but come, let us see what Red Rain has done."

Red Rain had certainly done well, for though he had no prisoners to show, each one of his

warriors had a scalp at his belt, while he had two, and pointing with pride to his victims, he said laconically:

"All gone."

"So I see."

"Now go and bring Reckless Charley here, and then we will wait the coming of Captain Tiger."

"Reckless Charley soon arrived, and Wild Bill said:

"Well, sir, we called in the chips of all of your comrades."

"Not all."

"Yes, all."

"Excepting Hyena Harry."

"Why, Red Dove killed him."

"No, he passed the pipes on a full run."

"Ho, braves, the devil himself has escaped."

"After him!" and Wild Bill's ringing voice sent Red Rain and his warriors flying in pursuit of the wickedest outlaw of them all.

"Now, sir, you are free, and if you wish a friend, I will be one to you, and none shall know that you were one of the Desperado Dozen."

As he spoke, Wild Bill cut the strings that bound Reckless Charley, who was about to make a reply, when he started and said:

"Hark!"

"What is it?"

"I hear the echo of hoofs in the arch."

"Then the Tiger must be returning to his lair," said Wild Bill, coolly.

"It can be no one else."

"Then he comes just in time to fall into the snare."

"We will await him, Red Dove, in his own quarters."

Fifteen minutes after four persons dashed up to the tent on horseback and drew rein, while a well-known voice shouted:

"Ho, Hyena Harry, your suggestion of the petticoats served me a good turn, and I am back again with the fair Edna my captive."

Hyena Harry is not here, Captain Tiger, but I am."

It was Wild Bill who spoke, and he seized Captain Tiger in his powerful, merciless grasp, and dragged him from his horse to the ground.

Alarmed, the two mounted outlaws turned to fly, when two pistol shots were heard, and they dropped dead from their saddles, for this time Red Dove's aim was true.

Dazed as it were Edna Insley sat in her saddle, bound there securely, and watched the struggle between Captain Tiger and Wild Bill.

At last the latter rose and said quietly:

"Now, Hugh Harcourt, you are gallows-fruit, I'll stake my life."

"Heaven, I thank Thee! Saved! saved! and I owe it to you," cried Edna, earnestly, and springing from her horse she dropped upon her knees by the side of the table and burst into a torrent of weeping.

CHAPTER LXI.

WILD BILL'S GOLD TRAIL.

WHEN the sun arose on the outlaw camp, the morning following its clever capture by Wild Bill, it fell upon two scenes widely differing from each other.

In a lonely, sheltered nook a maiden was crouching by the side of a new-made grave.

It was Edna Insley bending over the last resting-place of her poor father.

From a large tree, near the center of the camp, was hanging a human form.

One glance into the dark face, and it could be seen that Hugh Harcourt, the designing villain and man of many aliases, had not cheated the gallows, but had died as he deserved.

Wild Bill stood calmly looking on at the death-struggles of the man his order had hanged, while glaring up into the distorted face with an expression of fiendish joy was a pale, sad-faced woman.

It was Gertrude, the unfortunate, unhappy wife, who was dying by inches, when rescued by Wild Bill.

Behind her stood Red Dove and her warriors, and they too seemed content in the thought that the Desperado Dozen had been wiped out from the face of the earth, though it was a regret that Hyena Harry had, with his usual good luck, escaped.

Giving to Red Rain and his warriors the booty of the camp, and the horses found there, excepting those he needed, and bidding Red Dove farewell, with many thanks for the noble aid she had rendered him, Wild Bill set out for Poker City, accompanied by Edna Insley, sad

and wretched, and the stern-faced wife of the late chief of the Desperado Dozen.

By the side of the latter rode Charley Chambers, alias Reckless Charley, and when the party entered Poker City the citizens went wild with joy, and Edna and poor Gertrude were only too glad to escape to their rooms, and avoid the terrific enthusiasm.

With the suspense over, Edna Insley slept soundly that night, in spite of her grief, and undisturbed by the excitement raging through the town.

It was late when she awoke the following morning, and her first surprise was to learn that the widow of Hugh Harcourt had taken the morning stage for the East, and whatever became of her afterward, Edna never knew.

Then, there came a second surprise in a note handed to her by Slick Sam.

It was from Wild Bill, and read as follows:

"MISS INSLEY:—

"While I am absent please command Mr. Dale for any service you need rendered, as our mutual friend, the Fighting Parson, and our reformed friend, Reckless Charley, go with me on a mission I deem it a duty I owe your dead father and yourself to accomplish.

"That duty is to find for you your father's gold. Its hiding-place he never divulged to me, nor, as you told me, to yourself, and I have only words dropped from him in his delirium to guide me.

"But I hope for success, and at any rate you shall soon know the result.

"With best of wishes, yours,

"HIKOK."

Edna read this note over and over again, and the tears filled her eyes when she thought of the kindness of Wild Bill to her.

"But he does not love me; no, he does not love me, and I must bear the cross of unrequited love," she moaned sadly.

A knock at her door startled her; but controlling herself she called out, in a firm voice:

"Come in."

It was her third surprise that morning, for who should enter but a woman of striking appearance.

In fact, it was Red Ruth, whom Edna had had pointed out to her, and whose strange, sad life she had been told of.

"Pardon me, Miss Insley, but will you answer me a question, upon which much depends?" she asked, in a soft, earnest tone.

"Certainly, madam; be seated."

But Red Ruth remained standing, and simply said:

"It is said that Hyena Harry, the lieutenant of the Desperado Dozen, escaped."

"Yes."

"Did he?"

"He did, madam."

"You know this?"

"I do."

"From whose lips?"

"Mr. Hikok's."

"Tell me what you know of his escape, please."

"Red Dove, an Indian girl, returned his fire and he fell."

"Both Mr. Hikok—"

"You refer to Wild Bill?"

"Yes, madam."

"Well, I am listening," said the woman, nervously.

"Both Mr. Hikok and Red Dove believed the Hyena dead, and left him lying where he fell."

"But it was discovered afterward that he must have received only a slight wound, for he escaped, though Red Dove's warriors went in hot pursuit."

"Then if he lives my work is not yet done."

"I thank you, Miss Insley," and the strange woman turned and left the room.

CONCLUSION.

It was several weeks Edna Insley carefully awaited the return of Wild Bill and the Reverend Harvey Haviland, and she began to grow most anxious regarding their safety, as they remained away so long, when one evening they rode up to the hotel door and dismounted.

Both were looking well and had a triumphant expression in their eyes when she greeted them, which foretold success.

"Well, Miss Insley, our remarkable friend here, struck the gold trail, and, after a long and weary search found the treasure for you, and I congratulate you upon having inherited a snug fortune," said the parson.

Edna's eyes were running over with tears, and in silence, for she was unable to speak, she gave a hand to each.

"And, Miss Edna, as I feel like a guardian

and foster-father to you, I am going to transfer you to the protection of a wiser and better man, and into his hands I have already transferred your gold, to keep subject to your order," said Wild Bill.

"And you intend to cast me off?" she asked with a quivering voice.

"Oh no, miss, far from it; only I am a wild sort of fellow, and am a hard citizen to be the guardian of a young lady."

"But if ever you need Wild Bill call on him, and he'll be your friend through all."

"The parson understands them things better than I do, for he has just married that wild young Charley Chambers to Red Dove, and a splendid couple they made too; in fact I never expect to see a handsomer couple until you and the parson stand up together as man and wife."

Both Edna and the parson were startled out of all composure by this center shot; but it set them to thinking, and some time after Wild Bill gave the bride away in the Hikok Hotel parlors, to Harvey Haviland, and forgetting their reformation, the citizens of Poker City, I am compelled, as a truthful historian of facts, to make known, got very drunk over the joyful occasion, and repeated the orgie some months afterward, when Andy Rush received a letter from the Fighting Parson, saying that he had just received a call to a large church in the great metropolis.

"Pards, thet news are worth a drunk, an' at my expense, so set 'em up, Carrots, an' I'll pay thet score out o' thet leetle fun' I hed left, as treasurer o' thet chu'ch, an' which I'll never turn over to no Bible-banger as may foller in thet path o' thet squar' man, Harvey Haviland, thet Fighting Parson."

With this opinion of Andy Rush, the stage-driver of the Overland, kind reader, my pen is laid aside with kind wishes and *au revoir*.

THE END.

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